

Can Democracy Survive The Morbidly Rich?



*Thom Hartmann - Photo:
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02-02-2024 ~ So, Donald Trump won Iowa. A crazed billionaire who wants to “suspend the Constitution” and claims the right to murder his political enemies. It doesn’t have to be this way.

Imagine.

Fox “News” shuts down (or just decides to only tell the truth), and most of the steam goes out of the rightwing populist MAGA movement which its billionaire owners helped create in the U.S. Insurrectionist members of Congress find themselves in [jail facing sedition](#) charges, as the previous leader of the country is under [criminal investigation](#) for taking help from Putin’s Russia. The government begins the process of [decriminalizing abortion](#) nationwide. The Supreme Court’s *Citizens United* decision is overturned and, without the flow of billionaire money directing their votes, Congress begins to actually pass laws that [reflect the desires](#) of the majority of the people.

Unless you read international newspapers like *The Financial Times*, odds are you have no idea that same scenario is now playing out in Poland which, for the previous eight years, had been suffering under a Trump-like administration.

Last summer, progressive Polish politician Donald Tusk promised he was going to

clean up that country with an [“iron broom.”](#) Few took his promise seriously, but after being sworn into office last month, he’s actually doing it. As Maciej Kisilowski [writes for *The Financial Times*](#), just a few days after Tusk became prime minister:

“... Poland’s politicized public television station, notorious for its xenophobic, homophobic and racist messages, abruptly went dark. Tusk’s culture ministry summarily dismissed the station’s board and stopped broadcasts to prevent the outgoing leadership from inflaming tensions by airing live the takeover of the group’s headquarters.”

Last week two of the top rightwing politicians in Poland were arrested for abuse of power during the previous regime, while only a few hundred people showed up to protest the end of rightwing programming on the nation’s main television network.

Last Thursday there was a march to protest the new progressive prime minister, but the reaction was both tepid and nonviolent. As Kisilowski writes for *The Financial Times*:

“These decisive, if heavy-handed, actions come at a time when democrats globally are searching for strategies to deal with populists. In the U.S., for example, there is intense debate about whether the protracted legal cases against Donald Trump are serving to boost his campaign to return to the White House. Perhaps Tusk’s approach offers hope.”

Dislodging the death grip the GOP has on American politics will be more difficult than in Poland, in large part because five corrupt Republicans on the U.S. Supreme Court legalized political bribery with their *Citizens United* decision.

The [2020 election](#) cost over \$14 billion. The [2016 election](#) was only \$6.5 billion. But in 2008, two years before *Citizens United*, it hadn’t even hit \$1 billion: total spending with a mere [\\$717 million](#). As the Executive Director of the money tracking [opensecrets.org](#), [Sheila Krumholz](#), said:

“Total outside spending is surprisingly high for this point in the cycle—we’re already at nearly \$230 million. That’s more than twice the previous record through this point in the cycle, which was back in 2016. But it’s more than five times as much as was spent by this point in the last presidential cycle in 2020.”

Rightwing fascist-adjacent billionaires have used that open door to severely corrupt our political system, leading to massive gridlock when it comes to anything average people want.

Meanwhile, billionaires got tax cuts and deregulation making them vastly richer at the same time the companies that made them rich refuse to even commit to paying their workers a living wage ([fewer than one percent](#) of the world's top companies have made such a commitment).

As a result, Princeton scholars Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page [famously found](#) that the odds of average Americans' political desires being translated into policy are about the same as "random noise."

On the other hand, the new American system created by Republicans on our Supreme Court works quite well for the morbidly rich. The people Gilens and Page refer to as the "economic elites" frequently get everything they want from the political class.

They wrote that we still have the "features" of democracy, like elections, but ended their paper with [this](#) cautionary note:

"[W]e believe that if policymaking is dominated by powerful business organizations and a small number of affluent Americans, then America's claims to being a democratic society are seriously threatened."

So, here we are.

If, in a zoo somewhere, a single chimpanzee had risen up and taken all the food from all the other chimpanzees and was hoarding it without being challenged, scientists from all over the world would be trying to figure out what was wrong with that chimpanzee and why the others tolerated his theft.

As Oxfam International pointed out in a report timed to correspond with the kickoff of the billionaire love-fest [at Davos](#) this week, the five richest men in the world—four of them Americans—saw their net worth [more than double](#) over the past three years from \$405 billion to \$869 billion.

Since those five corrupt Republicans on the Court also ruled in *Citizens United* that corporations are "persons" with nearly-full access to the Bill of Rights—including the right to use money to pay off politicians (the Republicans on

the Court call it First Amendment-protected “free speech”)—the corporations that are producing these billionaires are also gouging American consumers as hard and fast as they can.

As Oxfam [noted](#) (keep in mind, “profit” means, essentially, “the money that’s left over after all of our business expenses, including payroll, that we, the owners, get to split up and keep for ourselves”):

“Mirroring the fortunes of the super-rich, large firms are set to smash their annual profit records in 2023. 148 of the world’s biggest corporations together raked in \$1.8 trillion in total net profits in the year to June 2023, a 52 percent jump compared to average net profits in 2018-2021. Their windfall profits surged to nearly \$700 billion.”

That money isn’t going to workers, though, who’ve seen their real, inflation-adjusted wages fall worldwide in the same period. Instead:

“The report finds that for every \$100 of profit made by 96 major corporations between July 2022 and June 2023, \$82 was paid out to rich shareholders. ... It would take 1,200 years for a woman working in the health and social sector to earn what the average CEO in the biggest 100 Fortune companies earns in a year.”

Thanks to Clarence Thomas’ tie-breaking vote in *Citizens United*, Americas are not getting what they want. Which is another way of saying the morbidly rich and the judges and politicians they’ve bought are actively breaking our democratic republic.

On the eve of the 2016 election of Donald Trump, for example, the *Progressive Change Institute* did a nationwide survey of likely voters. The [results were stark](#):

- 84 percent want the government to negotiate drug prices.
- 79 percent support expanding Social Security (which Haley and DeSantis both just last week promised to cut).
- 78 percent want “fair trade” that ends shipping our jobs overseas.
- 77 percent want to tax corporations that have moved jobs overseas.
- 77 percent want universal free pre-kindergarten.
- 74 percent want all Americans to be able to buy into Medicare-for-All.
- 71 percent support a massive infrastructure spending program aimed at

rebuilding our broken roads and bridges and putting people back to work.

- 70 percent want free college at all public universities.
- 68 percent want a guaranteed minimum income.
- 67 percent want the government to be the employer of last resort to end unemployment (like FDR did).
- 66 percent want the morbidly rich to pay at least a 50 percent income tax (currently the average American billionaire [pays around 3 percent](#)).
- 65 percent want the big banks broken up and a return to local banking.
- 64 percent want net neutrality so your billion-dollar corporate internet and email providers can't monitor everything you do online and sell that information.
- 63 percent want public financing of elections to get billionaire money out of them.
- 60 percent want the Post Office to offer inexpensive public banking.

President Biden and Democrats in Congress got some of the infrastructure work done and tried to end much of America's nearly \$2 trillion in student debt (until they were blocked by Republican lawsuits and six Republicans on the Supreme Court), and a small bit of the "Green New Deal" incorporated into the Inflation Reduction Act, but otherwise there's a lot that Americans want and deserve that they're not getting.

Why? Because the morbidly rich control much of our political process right now, and most of our media.

As former Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis famously said:

"We must make our choice. We may have democracy, or we may have wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we cannot have both."

This year's election will not only decide whether we're going to let Trump or a similar Republican end American democracy; it will also, if enough of us show up, determine if *Citizens United* can be legislatively overturned and we can purge our political system of the cancer of big money.

Democrats almost did it in 2022: the *For the People Act* would have reversed significant parts of *Citizens United* and provided for public funding of and more transparency around elections. It passed the House and got enough votes to pass the Senate under the Constitution.

Even the Republican filibuster could have been overcome if we hadn't been betrayed by Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema in the Senate. Make sure everybody you know is registered to vote. The stakes have never been higher.

By Thom Hartmann

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