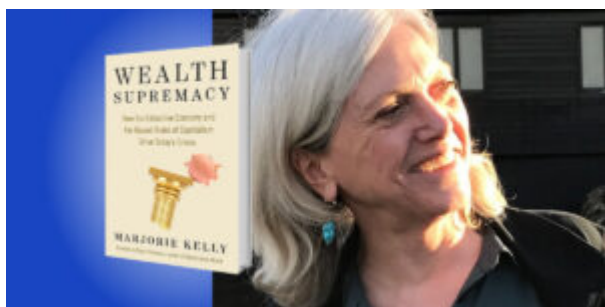


The Only Solution To “Wealth Supremacy” Is A Democratic Economy



01-22-2024 ~ *Our economy must center human outcomes rather than rising share prices, says social theorist and author Marjorie Kelly.*

The extraction of wealth is a pathology of late capitalism and is defined by the cultural and political processes by which the rich establish themselves as the dominant class. Social theorist and organizer Marjorie Kelly labels this phenomenon “wealth supremacy” which is also the title of her latest book. But as she points out in this exclusive interview for *Truthout*, wealth supremacy, which has institutionalized greed, defines a system that is not only biased but rigged against the great bulk of the population and thus detrimental to the economy, the citizens and the planet. She argues, in turn, that a movement to build a democratic economy is our only way out. Kelly is Distinguished Senior Fellow with the Democracy Collaborative. In addition to *Wealth Supremacy: How the Extractive Economy and the Biased Rules of Capitalism Drive Today's Crises* (2023), she is the author of *The Making of a Democratic Economy: Building Prosperity for the Many, Not Just the Few* (coauthored with Ted Howard; 2019). The interview that follows has been lightly edited for clarity.

*C. J. Polychroniou: One of the most pronounced developments over the past 40 years within the global economy, and particularly within developed countries, is financialization — which means finance has come to dominate our economy, our culture, the natural world, even our ostensibly democratic politics. Some say financialization represents a new phase of capitalism, while others see it as a consequence of neoliberalism. Your recent book, *Wealth Supremacy*, analyzes the current form of capitalism and shines a light on what you perceive as its core problem, while also offering a vision of an alternative system, a democratic economy — along with pathways to get there. Let's start with what you mean by*

“wealth supremacy,” and how, in your own view, financialization came to dominate over all other forms of economic activity.

Marjorie Kelly: We can't fix a problem that we can't name. We point to “corporate power,” “inequality” and “greed” as the problem. But these don't get to the root of the system's dysfunction. I call it wealth supremacy — the bias that institutionalizes infinite extraction of wealth for the wealthy, even as it means stagnation or losses for the rest of us. Personal greed is certainly operating. But the *system* problem is how greed is mandated, rewarded, normalized and institutionalized in the practices and institutions of the system.

It's mandated in how investments are managed, how corporations are governed; the aim of both is maximum income to capital. In operation, wealth supremacy takes the form of capital bias — the way only capital votes in corporations, how a rising stock market is equated with a successful economy.

Neoliberal government policies let this capital-centric machine loose. The result was financialization — the churning out of more and more financial wealth.

Behind it all is the aim of keeping the wealthy on top, protected, comfortable. Wealth supremacy is a manifestation of class bias. It's about the countless ways our culture favors the wealthy, the upper class. Class is many things — exquisite taste in art and wine, speaking and dressing well, having children attend the right schools — but it stands on a foundation of wealth, which makes possible all the rites of class.

Building wealth is certainly a goal that many people aspire to; yet, in your book, you argue that the ongoing processes of piling up wealth are actually detrimental to the economy, to citizens and to the planet. How is wealth detrimental? And who's the culprit here — the culture of “wealth supremacy” or capitalism itself?

The real problem is *excess* wealth — like the eight billionaires who own half the world's wealth. But the culture of our economy in general supports, in fact mandates, maximum wealth extraction. When investors look at their/our portfolio returns, we step into the dreamworld of wealth, the fiction that financial gains somehow fall from the sky, pristine and unblemished. The system is so focused on benefit to wealth that it ignores the impact on others. Wealth has an underside we rarely talk about.

At the Democracy Collaborative where I work, we commissioned work by three international economists who demonstrated how wealth grows by extraction. Every asset held by one person represents a claim on someone or something else. Credit card debt is a claim against your checkbook. Shares of stock are a claim on the value of a corporation and growing that value for wealthy shareholders often means laying off workers, or turning full-time jobs into part-time and Uberized jobs, in order to shift income from labor to capital. The problem isn't just that wealth is unequal. As these international economists demonstrated, the financial sector has become the locus where *inequality is created*.

As our society watches the wealth of multimillionaires and billionaires magically expand as though out of thin air, much of that wealth is being extracted from the pockets of ordinary people and our taxpayer-financed governments. We're told we're in a "trickle-down" economy. The truth is the reverse: What's happening is a vacuuming upward. Financial assets have become a giant sucking action squeezing consumer pocketbooks, creating unemployment, pushing housing prices to unreachable heights, creating monopolies that hampers family businesses, blocking our ability to tackle climate change, destabilizing the economy with stock market booms and busts. And enabling billionaires to capture democracy.

Capitalism is this system of extraction. Its aim is keeping the wealthy rolling in clover. Our culture helps to hold it all in place — to legitimize it — when we revere the wealthy as the possessors of godlike powers, and when we accept the operations and institutions of the economy as normal, necessary and benign. Calling it out as a system of bias is a step toward delegitimizing it, turning its cultural foundation to sand.

You write about the myths of wealth supremacy that normalize the system's bias. What are some of those myths and how do they impact politics and democratic governance in particular?

I identify seven myths that form the operating system of our economy. The core myth is *the myth of maximizing* — the idea that no amount of wealth is ever enough. That's the basic principle of investing. In the book, I distinguish "profit making" from "profit maximizing." Businesses need to make a profit to survive, but maximizing unleashes damage to society and destruction of the Earth.

There's the *myth of corporate governance*, which says workers are not members of the corporation. Workers can go to a company every day for 40 years, keeping the place running, but they're outsiders. Hedge fund investors holding shares for 15 minutes are the insiders, because only capital has a vote for the board. Workers are dispossessed and disenfranchised.

There's the *myth of materiality* in corporate and financial accounting, which says that gains to capital alone are real. Impacts on the environment or society aren't real, aren't "material," unless they affect capital. ExxonMobil increased shareholder value by [nearly 80 percent](#) in 2022. That's considered a success. No matter that these products are fueling catastrophic wildfires and flooding cities.

Important for our politics is the *myth of the free market*, which says government is to be subdued, for it's the enemy of the independence and power of wealth. There shall be no limits on the field of action of corporations and capital.

This myth is about letting the machine of wealth extraction run unimpeded. Yet as that machine revs into overdrive — financial assets are now *five times GDP* in the U.S., and even more in the U.K. — ongoing extraction becomes more difficult. Regulations need to be knocked down, monopolies built up, good jobs eliminated, taxes evaded. But regular folks in a democracy don't support such an agenda. Thus, the party of wealth gets white working-class resentment on its side by blaming immigrants, inflaming racial bias. And it seeks to destroy democracy itself — vilifying the very concept of government, deploying dark money to change how ballots are cast and counted. Or pitching the Big Lie, as Donald Trump is doing. Yet beyond Trump, as Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse has said, the broader assault on democracy is run by a small billionaire elite.

What helped remake U.S. politics was financialization. This led to runaway inequality — creating the expanding pool of the disaffected working class — while also creating the wealth that shifted policy toward corporations and the rich. The post-1980 neoliberal era marked the rise of the plutocracy — what Whitehouse calls "the unseen ruling class." Destroying democracy is part of its game plan to keep the wealth extraction machine going.

In what I understood to be an attempt on your part to interfuse class and race, you wrote that white supremacy and wealth supremacy are closely related. Are you saying that capitalism has color?

These two forms of bias are deeply intertwined. In the initial phase of what Guyanese intellectual Walter Rodney called the “capitalist/imperialist system,” much wealth came from extracting from persons and nations of color, through slavery and imperial possession. Racial extraction by finance continued in modern times through redlining, predatory mortgages, and more.

But if systems of wealth supremacy and white supremacy work together, they also function by separate logics. White supremacy *persists*, inflicting harm across generations. Yet wealth supremacy *accelerates*. Because the larger the sphere of swollen wealth becomes, the greater extraction it requires in order to grow larger still. If people of color have long been and remain primary targets for this extraction, today the planet itself is caught in its iron grip. And the suffering that people of color have long known is hitting white people.

State socialism is pretty much dead, and social democracy is on its knees. First, how do we go about changing the current system and, second, what would a democratic economy look like?

So now we’re talking about system change. Not regulating capitalism, but shifting to a next system, where capital is no longer at the center. It starts by recognizing that ownership and control of our political economy by a wealthy elite is the core problem. Then the solution becomes clear. We need to preserve political democracy and bring its spirit into the economy itself — creating a democratic economy, where wealth and power are held broadly, where economic institutions and practices are designed to allow all of us to prosper on a flourishing Earth.

How do we get there? We need a great ownership transition, including public ownership of key sectors like water and health care, worker ownership of enterprise, protection of the commons through trusts and preserves, just ownership and control of land, forests and housing. And we need corporations redesigned to have a legal obligation to serve the public good. The profit-maximizing corporation that exists to make the rich richer can no longer be allowed to exist.

We also need a next system of capital — including debt forgiveness when necessary, a new ecosystem of banking in the public interest, authentic impact and local investing, and wealth and inheritance taxes that prohibit the formation of dynasties. Also needed are regulations reining in the super-predators, the uber-

extractors like private equity and hedge funds.

I'm often asked if all this is possible. And I like to break that question into two parts. Are these new models of a democratic economy — like public banks and worker-owned firms — are these models *feasible*? The answer is yes. They're proven. They're practical. They're superior in their outcomes, if success means human well-being rather than just a rising share price.

The second question then is: Is system change possible? But if we had started there with climate change — asking if it's possible to cut carbon emissions by 80 percent — we would have given up. As Nelson Mandela said, "It always seems impossible until it's done."

System change doesn't start by asking if transformation is possible. Instead, we ask: Is it *necessary*? It's here we begin.

One thing we can know with some certainty. A world half plutocratic and half democratic cannot endure long. One half will eventually supersede the other. Either the plutocratic economy will destroy democracy, or we'll suffuse democracy into our economy, building the democratic economy now necessary to our survival.

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primary authors, 2020); *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic, and the Urgent Need for Radical Change* (an anthology of interviews with Noam Chomsky, 2021); and *Economics and the Left: Interviews with Progressive Economists* (2021).

Why Not Control All Drug Prices?



Sonali Kolhatkar

01-20-2024 ~ *Pharmaceutical companies are resisting public scrutiny and suing over modest drug price regulations. It's past time to regulate their profiteering.*

Major pharmaceutical companies in the United States are battling with Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders over an issue that is at the heart of whether we value human wellbeing over corporate profits. As chair of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP), Sanders has vowed to force CEOs of pharmaceutical companies to publicly answer for why their drug prices are so much higher than in other nations. He plans to bring a committee vote to [subpoena them](#). The subpoenas are necessary because—brazenly—the CEOs of Johnson & Johnson and Merck have simply refused to testify to the HELP committee. What are they afraid of?

In a defensive-sounding [letter](#) to Sanders, an attorney for Johnson & Johnson

accused the Senator of using committee hearings to “punish the companies who have chosen to engage in constitutionally protected litigation.” The letter does not specify the litigation in question—perhaps because it would sound so ridiculous and would reveal the company’s real agenda. Last July, the company, along with Merck and Bristol Myers Squibb [sued the Biden administration](#) for allowing the Medicare program to regulate prescription drug prices.

It appears that Johnson & Johnson and Merck are indeed afraid of being questioned by lawmakers about drug-profiteering in the U.S.

One pharmaceutical expert, Ameet Sarpatwari of Harvard Medical School explained to the [New York Times](#) that, “The U.S. market is the bank for pharmaceutical companies... There’s a keen sense that the best place to try to extract profits is the U.S. because of its existing system and its dysfunction.” Another expert, Michelle Mello, a professor of law and health policy at Stanford university, told the Times, “Drugs are so expensive in the U.S. because we let them be.”

In other words, it’s been a free-for-all for pharmaceutical companies in the U.S. In 2003, then-President George W. Bush [signed a Medicare reform bill into law](#), promising help for seniors struggling to pay for medications, but that law [stripped](#) the federal government of its power to negotiate drug prices for Medicare’s participants. It was a typically Republican, Orwellian move: promise help to ordinary people and deliver the exact opposite.

Nearly two decades later, the [Inflation Reduction Act](#) (IRA), which Biden signed into law in 2022, tied Medicare drug prices to inflation and required companies to issue rebates if prices rose too fast. It was the first time since Bush’s 2003 law that drug manufacturers were subject to any U.S. price regulations. Pharmaceutical companies aren’t having it, and not only did they sue Biden over the IRA, they don’t seem to want to answer for their actions publicly.

It’s not enough for Medicare to be able to cut drug prices. There needs to be nationwide regulation on all drug prices for all Americans. After all, American taxpayers generously subsidize the research and development of most drugs. A [report](#) by Sanders’ staff explained that “[w]ith few exceptions, private corporations have the unilateral power to set the price of publicly funded medicines.” The report’s authors chided that “[t]he government asks for nothing

in return for its investment.”

What’s more, the report rightly points out that people in other nations benefit from having access to lower-cost drugs that Americans have paid global pharmaceutical companies to develop. For example, [SYMTUZA](#), an HIV medication that scientists at the U.S. National Institutes of Health helped to develop, is available to U.S. patients for a whopping \$56,000 a year, while patients in the UK pay only \$10,000 a year for the same drug purchased from the same company.

It’s not as if companies like Johnson & Johnson have some perverse preference for European patients over American ones. It’s merely that their prices are regulated by most other industrial nations. The U.S. “happens to be the only industrialized nation that doesn’t negotiate” drug prices, explained Merith Basey, Executive Director of [Patients For Affordable Drugs NOW](#), in an [interview](#) on Rising Up With Sonali last fall.

Indeed, countries like the [UK, France, and Germany](#), offer models for the U.S. in drug price controls and much has been written about what works best. Further, there is—unsurprisingly—a strong public desire for price controls. According to a [Kaiser Family Foundation poll](#) in August 2023, “[m]ajorities across partisans say there is not enough regulation over drug pricing.” Moreover, a whopping 83 percent of those polled “see pharmaceutical profits as a major factor contributing to the cost of prescription drugs.”

There is no shortage of ideas for specific price control regulations that could work in the U.S. For example, the Center for American Progress’s October 2023 report, [“Following the Money: Untangling U.S. Prescription Drug Financing,”](#) delves deep into how market prices are determined for medications and suggests interventions at every stage of drug price setting.

Frankly, such complex solutions would not really be necessary if [all Americans could simply join Medicare](#) health coverage and if Medicare’s bargaining power to negotiate drug prices could be applied to all drugs. But, in the absence of this commonsense holistic approach to healthcare, even complex price controls would be better than no price controls.

Predictably, conservative capitalist critics have trotted out the same, tired

arguments against government price regulations of pharmaceuticals. “[Drug Price Controls Mean Slower Cures](#),” declared a Wall Street Journal editorial headline. The paper’s editorial board called the IRA, “the worst legislation to pass Congress in many years,” and went as far as accusing the Biden administration of “extortion.”

But who is engaging in extortion? Economists studying the pharmaceutical industry have found that for years companies have been so flush with cash that they have [spent hundreds of billions of dollars](#) in stock buybacks and exorbitant executive bonuses and pay packages. “The \$747 billion that the pharmaceutical companies distributed to shareholders was 13 percent greater than the \$660 billion that these corporations expended on research & development over the decade,” wrote William Lazonick and Öner Tulum in a report for the Institute for New Economic Thinking.

Further, the Wall Street Journal’s screed ignores price controls in the UK, France, Germany, and other nations. If those have no bearing on the speed and quality of drug development, why should U.S. price controls have an impact? And if they do have an impact, then Americans are being unfairly required to bear the burden that people all over the world benefit from.

The Journal’s editorial board made one accurate claim, saying that the IRA “will also give companies the incentives to launch drugs at higher prices and raise prices for privately insured patients to compensate for the Medicare cuts.” The paper made this prediction without any comment on unfettered corporate greed. Indeed, if anyone is engaging in de facto extortion, it appears as though pharmaceutical companies may be the guilty parties in punishing Americans for price controls.

Pharmaceutical companies launched the new year with announced price hikes on [at least 500 medications](#)—a massive effort at gouging the public. In contrast, the IRA’s drug price controls [apply to only 10 medications so far](#), and will be expanded to 15 drugs per year for the next four years, and 20 drugs per year thereafter.

Rather than removing price controls on the paltry numbers of medications the IRA can regulate, an easy fix is to apply those same regulations to most or all drugs. Best of all, in order for such a solution to be implemented, pharmaceutical

company CEOs wouldn't even have to drag themselves into committee hearings to explain away their corporate greed.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

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Source: Independent Media Institute

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How The Food Industry Uses Big Tobacco's Playbook



Gigi Kellett - Corporate

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International staff
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01-19-2024 ~ *The strategy used by Big Tobacco is called state or “ceiling” preemption: promoting weaker state public health laws to override stronger local laws.*

In the 1960s and 1970s, Big Tobacco and public health advocates were locked in a battle. The anti-smoking supporters were gaining ground as cities were [innovating ways to reduce smoking](#) and protect public health during this time. As former tobacco industry lobbyist Victor L. Crawford [observed](#), you’d “put out a fire [in] one place, another one would pop up somewhere else.”

But in the mid-1980s, this momentum stopped. [Big Tobacco](#) had discovered a way to reverse local gains. According to a 2020 [study in the American Journal of Public Health \(AJPH\)](#), the industry’s counteroffensive has led to more disturbing and enduring ramifications for public health—and our democracy—than previously understood.

The State Preemption Strategy

The strategy used by Big Tobacco is called state or “ceiling” preemption: promoting weaker state public health laws to override stronger local laws. [Between 1986 and 1991, the tobacco industry rammed through seven state preemption laws.](#)

The industry gained steam over the [next five years](#), imposing 17 additional preemption policies on states. Laws restricting youth access to tobacco products would be reversed or never see the light of day. Laws establishing smoke-free environments were overridden. Tobacco tax increases were stalled. Restrictions on tobacco retail licensing were relaxed.

Perhaps the most concerning finding of the [study published in the AJPH](#) is that it takes an average of 11 years to repeal these laws—if they’re repealed at all. As of 2019, no preemption laws on youth access or tobacco marketing—and [fewer than half of state preemption laws on smoke-free places—have been repealed.](#)

The tobacco industry has a [long-documented](#) history of targeting people in low-income communities and communities of color with the very tactics—like children-targeted marketing—preemption laws sought to protect. Consider the costs to public health and progress—especially in Black communities and other communities of color—when scarce resources are bound up in undoing bad policies versus securing new public health protections.

Research indicates that smoking-related deaths accounted for around [15 percent](#) of the decrease in the life expectancy gap between African-American men and white men at age 50 in 2019. [Disproportionate childhood exposure to second-hand smoke and target marketing of products](#) such as menthol are among the heightened risk factors for the Black community.

Preemption Harms Consumers—and Workers

As of 2018, Coca-Cola, McDonald’s, and the larger food and beverage industry have already seen the enactment of at [least a dozen laws](#) preempting local public health policies like soda taxes, product labeling, and restrictions on junk food marketing to kids.

This has allowed the industry to continue its racist marketing campaigns targeting Black youth and other [youth of color](#). Understanding these tactics is key to undoing and preventing further proliferation of the industry’s preemption push.

The four tobacco industry tactics outlined below are being modeled across industries, such as the food and beverage sector, disproportionately affecting communities of color and exacerbating diet-related disease crises.

Lobbying

First, to give Big Tobacco’s political agenda credibility, tobacco giants like R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company have invested heavily in trade associations and [front groups](#) to do their bidding, from so-called “smokers’ rights groups” to restaurant, hotel, and gaming associations.

Unsurprisingly, a similar cast—like state affiliates of the [U.S. Chamber of Commerce](#) and the [National Restaurant Association](#) (NRA)—is again the muscle behind state preemption pushes to block new soda taxes, as well as critical policies to assure food workers’ health and well-being, such as new paid sick leave requirements and minimum wage increases.

Examples include the Texas Supreme Court [quashing city efforts](#) to guarantee municipal paid sick leave in 2020 and the Minnesota Supreme Court [ruling against](#) the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce’s contention that Minneapolis’s paid sick leave requirements were preempted by state law during the same year.

The Power Coalition for Equity and Justice, a group of social justice organizations in Louisiana, has been [mobilizing](#) to undo what a spokesperson of the coalition—in a 2020 article in Scalawag—called, “yet another tool of white supremacy” and an example of the “plantation [mentality’s]” manifestation in state politics: state preemption of local minimum wage increases.

Campaign Contributions

Second, Big Tobacco lavished money on federal elections. In 1998 alone, [the tobacco lobbies contributed more than \\$70 million](#). Predominantly, Republican candidates have received more than \$50 million from the tobacco industry since 1990. In this same period, the NRA and its most prominent corporate members—like McDonald’s, Darden, and Yum! Brands—spent [more than \\$60 million](#) in disclosed federal contributions.

[An analysis by my organization, Corporate Accountability](#), in partnership with [Restaurant Opportunities Centers United](#), [Food Chain Workers Alliance](#), [Berkeley Media Studies Group](#), and [Real Food Media](#), found a disturbing correspondence between NRA campaign contributions and the propensity of those receiving them—like Senator Mitch McConnell and Representative Kevin McCarthy, both Republicans—to oppose progressive policies such as improvements to food labeling, stronger worker protections, and minimum wage increases.

Local Preemption

Third, the industry obscured preemption through legislative channels. As if making an end-run around local democracy wasn’t bad enough, Big Tobacco slipped preemption into a [wide array of bills](#)—from property taxes to pesticides.

In 2006, the industry spent more than \$100 million to fight tobacco control measures and funded an Ohio measure (“[Smoke Less Ohio](#)”) that would have [rolled back local smoke-free laws](#) and prevented their adoption in the future. Ohioans [voted against](#) the ballot measure.

Twelve years later, in 2018, Big Soda [spent millions](#) on a California ballot initiative that made it harder to impose soda taxes and increase any taxes. In

exchange for dropping the ballot initiative, lawmakers and then-Governor Jerry Brown agreed to prohibit new taxes on grocery items—including sugar-sweetened beverages—until January 1, 2031, as part of a larger tax overhaul.

According to California state Senator Scott Wiener, a Democrat, the industry basically [aimed](#) “a nuclear weapon at [the] government in California and [said], ‘If you don’t do what we want, we’re going to pull the trigger, and you’re not going to be able to fund basic government services.’”

Legal Threats

Fourth, Big Tobacco issued legal threats. Despite being ineffective at overturning laws, the industry has pursued dozens of cases as a deterrent to the passage of new laws. In Michigan, Big Tobacco sponsored a Michigan Restaurant Association and Michigan Chamber of Commerce [lawsuit attempting to strike down a local smoke-free policy in 1998](#).

The lawsuit tied up the town of Marquette in legal proceedings for about five years despite only succeeding in repealing a small part of the law.

But after years of being on the receiving end of the industry’s tactics, the public health community has regrouped. They [generated](#) media coverage that exposed Big Tobacco’s chicanery in advancing state preemption policies and—instead of putting out fires once preemption had been introduced or adopted—advocates implemented proactive lobbying approaches.

One of the earliest examples is from 1996 when the [Indiana Campaign for Tobacco-Free Communities](#) helped compel then-Governor Evan Bayh to veto a law preempting “virtually non-existent” local tobacco control laws.

Meanwhile, in 1994, a national preemption task force was [formed](#) by leading health organizations. It attracted prominent political figures like Hillary Clinton and former Representative Henry Waxman, a Democrat, and mobilized grassroots movements and more coherent counterstrategies. By 2000, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [advocated eliminating ceiling preemption laws](#).

The public health movement also helped expand legal networks. From coast to coast, [states helped fund legal resource centers](#) that worked with health departments in drafting tobacco control laws that could weather industry challenges.

But history is repeating itself. For example, e-cigarette maker Juul has worked tirelessly to [ensure state increases in the minimum age to purchase tobacco products are paired with preemptions](#) on local governments taking any further actions to regulate vaping (like flavor bans).

Business groups have [filed lawsuits against Los Angeles County, Palmdale, California](#), and [Edina, Minnesota](#), seeking to nix local prohibitions on flavored e-cigs, claiming these laws are preempted by federal law. The COVID-19 pandemic, which has compromised the respiratory health of its victims, does not seem to have caused this destructive industry one bit of pause.

It is critical for those taking on the food industry to get ahead of attempts at [preemption](#).

We can scarcely afford more industry-driven policies denigrating public health and deepening already profound health inequities. There will be no shortage of bills and ballot initiatives intent on supplanting popular democracy with narrow corporate prerogatives. But we have the solutions because we've faced this problem before.

By Gigi Kellett

Author Bio: [Gigi Kellett](#) is a managing director for [Corporate Accountability](#), an organization that, for more than 40 years, has stopped transnational corporations from devastating democracy, trampling human rights, and destroying our planet. She is a contributor to the [Observatory](#).

Source: Independent Media Institute

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Climate Change And Energy Transition: The 2023 Scorecard



01-15-2024 *The numbers are in, and it doesn't look good.*

The numbers are in. Last year was the [hottest on record](#) by a wide margin. The planet is now 1.48 degrees Celsius warmer than it was before the fossil fuel revolution. Global heating is accelerating. This year (2024) is likely to set another record because the latter half of last year featured an *El Nino* climate pattern that continues to influence global weather. The last colder-than-average year, according to NOAA, was [1976](#).

The United States experienced a [record number](#) of billion-dollar weather disasters in 2023. Canada's wildfires in June resulted in an unprecedented flurry of air-quality alerts in the Northeast and Midwest of the U.S., with New York temporarily suffering the worst air quality of any city in the world. Wildfires also devastated Maui.

Elsewhere in the world, Libya, Guam, Malawi, and Peru experienced horrific floods. According to the United Nations, drought now affects [a quarter of humanity](#). [Developing countries](#) were stuck with proportionally higher recovery costs on a per-capita basis.

The solution to climate change is to reduce and reverse the decades-long trend of annually increasing greenhouse gas concentration in the planetary atmosphere. So, let's see what the numbers tell us on that score. The carbon dioxide (CO₂) level in Earth's atmosphere is now over [420 parts per million](#), up from 315 ppm in

1958 when the first direct measurements commenced. The atmospheric CO2 concentration has been increasing at [over 2 ppm per year](#) for the past several years.

This added CO2 in the atmosphere comes from human activities that release carbon dioxide (and other greenhouse gases) into the air. U.S. carbon emissions were [down 3 percent](#) in 2023 due mainly to an ongoing national switch from burning coal to burning natural gas for generating electricity. But worldwide carbon emissions were up 1.1 percent compared to 2022. Since climate change is a global problem, it is the global statistic that matters.

Most emissions are energy-related, so phasing out fossil fuels in favor of low-carbon energy alternatives is critical. While it's too early to report final data for renewable energy additions in 2023, last June, the International Energy Agency (IEA) [forecasted](#) that global renewable energy generation capacity would increase by a record 440 GW for the year (total world renewable energy generation capacity, including hydropower, stands at about 4,500 GW).

However, confusion sometimes results from failure to distinguish *production capacity* from *actual generation* since solar and wind installations typically generate only 20 to 50 percent of their theoretical capacity due to variations in sunlight and wind.

So, let's look at the actual generation numbers. Of the roughly [30,000 terawatt hours](#) of electricity generated globally in 2022, [8,500 terawatt hours](#) (29 percent) came from renewables—over half of that from hydropower.

We must be careful to distinguish between “electricity” and “energy”—another frequent source of confusion. Electricity's share of all end-use energy usage remains stable at about 20 percent. After accounting for conversion factors, renewables (including solar, wind, hydro, geothermal, biofuels, and traditional biomass—i.e., burning wood for cooking and heating) provide about [16 percent](#) of total world primary energy.

Nuclear energy also entails relatively low levels of carbon emissions, but its share of world energy fell to a [multi-decade low](#) in 2023, and nuclear projects are notoriously slow and expensive to bring online.

To reach net zero emissions by 2050 (which [the IPCC considers necessary](#) to cap

warming at 1.5 degrees Celsius) by providing 100 percent of total global energy from renewables, we would need a nearly ten-fold increase in renewable energy production, even assuming zero growth in overall global energy demand during that time.

Annual additions of solar and wind capacity would have to increase by well over an order of magnitude (10x) compared to the current record rate. Electrification of transport, manufacturing, agriculture, and other sectors would also need to accelerate dramatically.

In its [Net-Zero Roadmap](#) report published in September 2023, the International Energy Agency (IEA) recognized the extreme difficulty of achieving these increases in renewable energy and suggested instead that 19 percent of final energy will still come from fossil fuels in 2050 and that final-energy consumption will be reduced by 26 percent.

To remove the resultant emissions, the IEA estimated that one billion metric tons per year of carbon dioxide would need to be captured by 2030, rising to 6 billion tonnes by 2050. Mechanized technologies for carbon capture and storage (CCS) and direct air capture (DAC) that would be required to do this have been [criticized](#) as being too expensive, too energy intensive, and underperforming in terms of their goal.

Currently, [about 2 billion tonnes of carbon](#) dioxide is captured annually, nearly all by forests; only [49 million metric tons](#) are being removed from the atmosphere by carbon removal technology projects across the world. About 80 percent of that captured carbon is used for “enhanced oil recovery.”

Meanwhile, over [37 billion metric tons](#) of carbon dioxide are being released by human activities, primarily from the burning of fossil fuels.

We can conclude from these scorecard numbers that, as of the start of 2024, humanity is not on track to avoid catastrophic climate change. The likelihood of limiting warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (the goal stated in the [Paris Accords](#) of 2015) is now extremely remote. Indeed, that threshold may be exceeded [within just the next few years](#).

If world leaders genuinely hope to change these trends, dramatic action that entails reevaluating current priorities will be required. Not just fossil fuel

subsidies but also continued growth in global energy-tied economic activity must be questioned. Otherwise, we may be destined to fulfill the old adage: “If you do not change direction, you will end up where you are heading.”

By Richard Heinberg and J. David Hughes

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Dark Money Vouchers Are Having A Moment



Josh Cowen - Photo:

The decades-long push to divert tax dollars toward religious education [reached new heights](#) last year. As proclaimed by EdChoice—the advocacy group devoted to school vouchers—2023 was the year these schemes reached “[escape velocity](#).” In strictly legislative terms, seven states passed new voucher systems, and ten more expanded existing versions. Ten states now run eleven universal voucher programs, all of which have no meaningful income or other restrictions.

But these numbers change quickly. As late as the last week of November, the Republican governor of Tennessee announced plans to create [just such a universal voucher system](#).

To wit: successful new voucher and related legislation has come almost exclusively in states won by Donald Trump in 2020. And even that Right-ward bent required substantial investment—[notably by heiress and former U.S. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos](#) and [the Koch network](#)—in state legislative campaigns to oust voucher opponents. Instructively, many of those opponents were often GOP legislators representing rural districts with few private schools to benefit.

As a scholar who has studied voucher systems—including through research [funded by conservative organizations](#)—I have been watching these developments with growing concern. It can all be difficult to make sense of, so let’s walk through it.

Vouchers Hurt Kids, Defund Public Schools and Prop-Up Church Budgets

First, why are these new voucher schemes such bad public policy? To understand the answer, it’s important to know that the typical voucher-accepting school is a far cry from the kind of elite private academy you might find in a coastal city or wealthy suburban outpost. Instead, they’re usually [sub-prime providers](#), akin to predatory lenders in the mortgage sector. These schools are either pop-ups opening to cash in on the new taxpayer subsidy, or financially distressed existing schools desperate for a bailout to stay open. Both types of financially insecure schools [often close anyway](#), creating turnover for children who were once enrolled.

And the voucher results reflect [that educational vulnerability](#): in terms of academic impacts, vouchers have some of the worst results in the [history of education research](#)—on par or worse than what COVID-19 did to test scores.

Those results are bad enough, but the real issue today is that they [come at a cost of funding traditional public schools](#). As voucher systems expand, they cannibalize states' ability to pay for their public education commitments. [Arizona](#), which passed universal vouchers in 2022, is nearing a genuine budget crisis as a result of voucher over-spending. [Six of the last seven states](#) to pass vouchers have had to slow spending on public schools relative to investments made by non-voucher states.

That's because most new voucher users were never in the public schools—they are new financial obligations for states. The vast majority of new voucher beneficiaries have been students who [were already in private school](#) beforehand. And for many rural students who live far from the nearest private school, vouchers are unrealistic in the first place, meaning that when states cut spending on public education, they weaken the only educational lifeline available to poorer and more remote communities in some places. That's why even many GOP legislators representing rural districts—conservative in every other way—[continue to fight against vouchers](#).

Vouchers do, however, benefit churches and church schools. Right-wing advocacy groups have been busy [mobilizing Catholic school](#) and other religious school parents to save their schools with new voucher funding. In new voucher states, [conservatives are openly advocating](#) for churches to startup taxpayer-funded schools. That's why vouchers eventually become [a key source of revenue](#) for those churches, often replacing the need to rely on private donations. It's also why many existing religious schools [raise tuition](#) almost immediately after vouchers pass.

The Right-Wing War on Public Schools

Victories for these voucher bills is nothing short of an ascendent Right-wing war on public education. And the link to religious nationalism energizes much of that attack.

Voucher bills have dovetailed almost perfectly with new victories for other priorities of the Religious Right. Alongside vouchers, anti-LGBTQ+ legislation has

also increased: [508 new bills in 2023 alone](#), according to the American Civil Liberties Union. As has a jump [in legislation restricting book access](#) in schools and libraries, with more than half of those bans targeting books on topics related to race and racism, or containing at least one LGBTQ+ character.

It is also important to note the longstanding antipathy that [Betsy DeVos](#), the [Koch Network](#), and other long-term voucher backers have toward organized labor—including and especially in this case, teachers' unions. And that in two states that passed vouchers this year—[Iowa](#) and [Arkansas](#)—the governors also signed new rollbacks to child labor protections at almost the exact same time as well.

To close the 2022 judicial session, the Supreme Court issued its latest expansion of voucher jurisprudence in [Carson v. Makin](#), holding that states with private school voucher programs may not exclude religious providers from applying tax dollars specifically to religious education. That ruling came just 72 hours before the Court's decision in [Dobbs v. Jackson](#) removed reproductive rights from federal constitutional protections.

To hear backers of vouchers, book bans, and policies targeting [transgender students](#) in school bathrooms tell it, such efforts represent a new movement toward so-called “parents' rights” or “education freedom,” as Betsy DeVos describes in her [2022 memoir](#). But in truth this latest push was a long time coming. DeVos is only one part of the vast network of Right-wing donors, activists, and organizations devoted to conservative political activism.

That network, called the [Council for National Policy](#), includes representatives from the [Heritage Foundation](#), the influential Right-wing policy outfit; multiple [organizations funded by Charles Koch](#); the [Leadership Institute](#), which trains young conservative activists; and a number of state policy advocacy groups funded by a conservative philanthropy called the [Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation](#).

It was the Bradley Foundation that seeded much of the legal work in the 1990s defending early voucher programs in state and federal courts. Bradley helped to fund the [Institute for Justice](#), a legal group co-founded by a former Clarence Thomas staffer named Clint Bolick after a personal donation from Charles Koch. The lead trial attorney for that work was [none other than Kenneth Starr](#), who was

at the time also in the middle of his infamous pursuit of President Bill Clinton.

In late 2023, the Institute for Justice and the voucher-group EdChoice [announced a new formal venture](#), but that partnership is just a spin on an older collaboration, with the [Bradley Foundation](#) as the tie that binds. EdChoice itself, when it was called the Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation, [helped fund the data analysis](#) cited [by Institute lawyers](#) at no less than the Supreme Court ahead of its first decision approving vouchers in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* (2002).

From these vantage points, 2023 was a long time coming indeed.

And heading into 2024, the voucher push and its companion “parents’ rights” bills on schoolbooks and school bathrooms show no sign of weakening.

Prior to his political career, the new Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Mike Johnson, was [an attorney with the Alliance Defending Freedom](#). That group, which itself has deep ties [to Betsy DeVos’s family](#), has led the legal charge to rollback LGBTQ+ equality initiatives. It was also involved [“from the beginning,”](#) as its website crows, in the anti-abortion effort that culminated with *Dobbs*.

The Heritage Foundation has created a platform called Project 2025, which serves as [something of a clearinghouse](#) for what would be the legal framework and policy agenda for a second Trump Administration. [Among the advisors and funders](#) of Project 2025 are several organizations linked to Charles Koch, Betsy DeVos, and others with ties to the Council for National Policy. The Project’s [education agenda](#) includes dismantling the U.S. Department of Education—especially its oversight authority on anti-discrimination issues—and jumpstarting federal support for voucher programs.

A dark money group called [The Concord Fund](#) has launched an entity called Free to Learn, ostensibly organized around opposition to the teaching of critical race theory in public schools. In reality, these are active players in Republican campaign attacks around a variety of education-related culture war issues. The Concord Fund is closely tied to [Leonard Leo](#), the Federalist Society chief, [Council of National Policy member](#), and architect of the *Roe* takedown. Through the Leo connection, the Concord Fund was also [instrumental](#) in confirming Donald Trump’s judicial nominations from Brett Kavanaugh on downward.

And so while the 2023 “parents’ rights” success has been largely a feature of red state legislatures, the 2022 Carson ruling and the nexus between Leonard Leo, the Alliance Defending Freedom, and the Institute for Justice itself underscore the importance of the federal judiciary to Right-wing education activism.

Long-term, the goal insofar as school privatization is concerned appears to be nothing short of a Supreme Court ruling that tax-subsidized school vouchers and homeschool options are [mandatory in every state](#) that uses public funding (as all do) to support education. The logic would be, as [Betsy DeVos herself previewed](#) before leaving office, that public spending on public schools without a religious option is a violation of [Free Exercise protections](#).

Such a ruling, in other words, would complete the destruction of a wall between church and state when it comes to voucher jurisprudence. Earlier Court decisions have found that states may spend tax dollars on school vouchers but, as the Right’s ultimate goal, the Supreme Court would determine that states must.

Closer on the horizon, we can expect to see each of these Right-wing groups acting with new energy as the 2024 campaign season heats up. The [president of the Heritage Foundation](#)—himself [yet another member](#) of the Council for National Policy—has recently taken over the think tank’s political arm, called Heritage Action. At the start of the year, investigative reporting linked Heritage Action to earlier [voter suppression](#) initiatives, signaling potential tactics ahead.

And the money is going to flow—they have all said as much. After Heritage’s merger of its policy and political arms, Betsy DeVos’s American Federation for Children followed suit by creating the [AFC Victory Fund](#)—a new group to spearhead its own campaign activity.

Their plan includes a \$10 million base commitment to ramp up heading into 2024. “Coming off our best election cycle ever,” AFC’s announcement declared, “the tectonic plates have shifted decisively in favor of educational freedom, and we’re just getting started.” And, they warned:

“If you’re a candidate or lawmaker who opposes school choice and freedom in education - you’re a target.”

In that threat lies the reality of the latest voucher push, and of this moment of so-called parents’ rights. None of this is a grassroots uprising. “Education freedom”

is a top-down, big-money operation, tied to every other political priority of religious nationalism today.

But coming at the end of this past year's legislative successes, AFC's warnings are also a very clear statement of what is yet to come. The push to privatize American education is only just getting started.

By Josh Cowen

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Where Do Living Creatures Get Their Sense Of Rhythm?



The science of rhythm across species is a new and growing research field, as yet without agreement on the question of whether the phenomenon of rhythm exists for every species. There is, however, fascinating and suggestive experimental and observational evidence: Parrots can bob their heads to a beat; rats can synchronize head movement to music; the cockatoo Snowball is famous for dancing; the California sea lion Ronan can move to music but does not vocalize; and chimpanzees can beat rhythmically on hollow tree trunks.

Research on human musicality is also advancing; [one study](#) found that fetuses were attuned to the rise and fall in the sound of music and speech (cadence) by

the last three months in the womb. Further, their baby cries mimicked the cadence of the mother's native tongue, lilting upward in French and descending in German.

Animals singing and dancing in time to music may seem perfectly natural to human audiences familiar with Disney and other cartoon characters. In reality, each species varies in its capacity to perceive a beat and coordinate movement with it, a synchronized process called entrainment. The research on entrainment in non-human species in the past decade alone has changed the way scientists think about rhythm across species and how it works.

Yet, a consensus on entrainment is still lacking. Although studies have found that dolphins, bats, and songbirds can learn vocal patterns, some researchers have determined that these species have "[no evidence of rhythmic entrainment](#)." An [opposing view](#) holds that there is, "in fact, no convincing case" against beat-matching in animals, and that it could be widespread.

As a non-specialist looking at the emerging evidence, the second view seems more likely.

How Rhythm Works

One of the basic questions in the science of rhythm is whether the brain mechanisms enabling rhythm and entrainment are similar in humans and nonhumans.

The physical mechanism of rhythm and synchrony—matching motion, like tapping a foot or bobbing a head—in non-human species is an open research question. The perception of simple rhythms, patterns, periodicities, and the pattern of beats in a musical piece should all be investigated, a [2021 review](#) of the field recommends.

There are two major competing hypotheses of the brain architecture involved in rhythm: gradual audiomotor evolution and vocal learning, each with experimental data to back it up. Gradual audiomotor evolution focuses on the brain's neural circuit interaction of hearing and movement and does not link with vocal perception. The vocal learning hypothesis centers on the idea that the brain has a preadaptation for vocal cues that evolves genetically and culturally.

The [gradual audiomotor evolution hypothesis](#) holds that rhythmic entrainment, the ability to perceive a beat and coordinate movement with it rhythmically, is a

complex phenomenon in the human brain involving hearing and the motor system (movement) in a two-way interaction. Until recently, scientists thought that this is a specifically human ability, but newer research indicates that some non-human primates and other animals have the ability to perceive a beat and match it to movements.

Among animals found to have rhythmic entrainment, there are wide variations in aptitude. Some experimental studies found that Rhesus monkeys, when trained, could tap to match a tempo, but macaques could not.

The empirical data from many different experiments suggest that chimpanzees and humans have similar neural circuits involved in perceiving rhythm patterns and that the neural circuits of macaques are less evolutionarily developed in this ability. Doubters of this conclusion suggest that there is so little data that more research might find that macaques are also musically trainable.

Interestingly, the same [study](#) found that macaques could synchronize their arm movements with visual cues, but not with vocal cues. (Picture pairs of macaques facing each other, moving their arms in synchronous rhythm.)

An Alternative Hypothesis: Vocal Learning

Vocal learning is an alternative hypothesis, first proposed in 2006, which instead looks at vocal perception and the neural circuit—how sound is perceived and what it is connected to in the brain. When the original vocal learning hypothesis was proposed, there was as yet no research showing beat perception and synchronization in non-human animals, either in the field or in the laboratory.

Based on more recent experimental data, a [2021 study](#) has updated the vocal learning hypothesis. The revised view holds that vocal learning is a “preadaptation for sporadic beat perception and synchronization” that emerges from the coevolution of genes and culture. In other words, a preexisting neural structure develops the ability of a species to take on a new function, in this case, entrainment. Humans have a specialized sound and motion (auditory-motor) circuitry in their brains which enables more complex vocal learning, this theory proposes. The human brain has existing neural oscillations—electrical activity or brain waves—and these get stimulated by sounds outside the body and add new oscillations—waves of regular movement back and forth—to the existing ones.

The vocal learning proponents suggest that vocal learning capacities exist in a

continuum across species, providing many areas for further research in beat perception, synchronization, and cognitive gene and culture coevolution.

So far, there is a lack of research into the coevolution of genes and culture, the 2021 study notes, so vocal learning research into the neural specializations that develop could help move general knowledge of coevolution forward. The study points to one coevolution area as an example, the anatomical changes accompanying lactose tolerance that developed 10,000 years ago in dairying cultures.

What About Human Rhythm?

The importance of music in all human cultures is well documented, but how and why it developed evolutionarily is still being investigated as part of the broader question of rhythm. To take one example, recent research indicates that beat perception is probably not the result of the heartbeat, as initially thought, but requires “[specific neural networks](#).”

Another approach is to look at music culturally, as does a [2023 anthropological study](#) supported by the [Leakey Foundation](#), asking why music is ubiquitous across cultures.

An international team of researchers tested hypotheses of the function of music and singing by studying the hunter-gatherer Mbendjele BaYaka people in the Republic of Congo. For two years, the researchers observed a group of BaYakan women who spontaneously sang as they foraged in the rainforest for tubers and other food, concluding that singing produced community spirit, averted potential conflict, and in the words of the BaYakas, made the forest “happy.”

The team was investigating two hypotheses for the evolution of music: first, that singing developed as a tool to signal solidarity in the group and affirm a “willingness” to work together, and second, that it warned against possible dangers. Additionally, the researchers explored the function of mothers singing to their infants.

The researchers observed 1,704 separate foraging trips, 19 percent of which involved singing. The evidence clearly supported the first hypothesis, that the women sang to affirm cooperation and avoid conflict, especially in groups of less familiar women. There was no indication that the purpose of singing was to deter predatory animals. In fact, the researchers found that the BaYaka sing to “please

the forest” so that the forest would provide more food.

Another tantalizing possibility is that “touch triggers singing”; the women were more likely to sing when they were holding an infant. They yodeled loudly or patted the infant’s back rhythmically when the child cried.

The study concludes that “music could have originated to signal coalition, particularly cooperative intent or intention to form coalitions within and between groups,” and it suggests future research on coalition signaling in other societies.

A Work in Progress

Based on this brief look at current research among humans and nonhumans, the answer to the question of whether all species have rhythm is “yes.” How exactly this works, how it evolved, and rhythm’s present role in animal and human communication are research topics in progress. Stay tuned!

By Marjorie Hecht

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