

Political Collapse: Lessons From Fallen Empires



09-04-2024 ~ Our investigation of the disastrous society-wide collapses of four premodern polities, China's Ming Dynasty, the South Asian Mughal Empire, the High Roman Empire, and Renaissance Venice led to the discovery of an unexpected historical pattern. This revelation was not evident before these sudden collapses as all four polities had demonstrated forms of governance that persisted for centuries, had been among the wealthiest and best-governed polities of their eras, and had embraced policies fostering inclusiveness and egalitarianism that engendered strong support from the majority of their citizens.

We could not identify any exogenous causal factors for the collapses—such as drought, epidemic, or conquest by a more powerful foe (three of the four eventually were conquered, but only after their governments were considerably weakened)—adding to our confusion about what led to these major political transformations.

To understand the reasons for the political breakdowns, we decided to revisit an [earlier article](#) in which we had posited an answer to this question when it became increasingly clear to us that the conflictive political culture of the contemporary U.S. presents striking parallels with what we had discovered. We aim to reexamine our article to bring a comparative perspective on historically well-known episodes of collapse, their causes, and negative outcomes, and to alert U.S. citizens of the potential dangers we face, so we can highlight the need to take urgent corrective actions. We begin by referring to recent works by political scientists and anthropologists that provided theoretical context for our arguments.

Collective Action Theory Expands Our Understanding of Governance

In all four instances, collapse followed quickly after the leaders of these polities inexplicably and suddenly abandoned principles and practices that had successfully underpinned state-building and social stability. Their actions initiated a cascading series of events that brought a rapid decline in many aspects of

society, which extended beyond the government. But why would the actions of just a few people have such severe consequences for otherwise enduring and well-organized polities?

We identified a plausible answer to this question when we considered collapse from the vantage of recently developed theories of human cooperation developed by political economists [Margaret Levi](#) and [Elinor Ostrom](#), along with several others. The cooperation ideas intrigued us because they potentially laid down a pathway to evaluate traditional claims that state-building did not result from cooperation in premodern times, but from the actions of the autocratic elite who coercively gained dominion over subservient and easily mystified subaltern subjects. A reliance on coercion was foundational for the traditional Western understanding that the rise of democracy in Classical Athens 2,600 years ago was an exceptional event that set Western (“Occidental”) political history on a separate and democratic track, sharply different from the “Oriental” autocracies. But is this entrenched presumption correct?

Humans as ‘Contingent Cooperators’

The most salient feature of collective action theory separating it from the Orientalist tradition is that it does not presume mystified subaltern subjects nor coercive leadership. The theory hypothesizes that both ruling authorities and subjects are thoughtful social actors (“contingent cooperators”) who will agree to limit their selfish actions when they perceive that the actions of others are consistent with mutual benefit (“contingent mutuality”).

Our recent work in this [regard](#) has supported the hypothesis as applied to state formation. What we have found is that subjects are more likely to gain confidence in governing authorities and the policies and practices of a government based on the degree to which the leadership willingly provides elements of what is called “good government” (or “[good governance](#)”).

Good governance includes the degree to which leadership will accept limits on its power, is willing to develop the governing capacity to identify and punish official corruption, is willing to provide citizens access to an impartial judiciary, and is prepared to implement equitable taxation, to open up access to positions of governing authority without favoritism, and to provide public goods beneficial to all households.

A key aspect of good governance is that if its benefits foster citizen confidence and compliance with obligations, its practices and principles must be judiciously adhered to, and good governance benefits must be made available across the realm without favoritism. We discovered that in instances where mutual benefit and good governance are key, state-builders and citizens recognized that impartiality was threatened when a leader's power, or the state itself, was religiously sacralized. The same threat was felt when the state gained legitimacy and fiscal benefit by associating or controlling a particular religious institution (analogous to the contemporary concept of separation of church and state).

The population of Renaissance Venice, for example, was largely Catholic, yet featured considerable cultural diversity while also depending on trade relations with merchants who belonged to diverse cultures and religions. Correspondingly, strict rules prohibited affiliations of the leadership and their immediate family members with any religious institution. In South Asia, the Mughal Emperor Akbar instituted a strong program for governing in a diverse region that mandated religious neutrality of the state and encouraged reasoned dialogues between religious and political leaders. The Roman and Ming leaderships certified their legitimacy to govern, not as religiously sanctified beings, but as leaders whose actions were expected to benefit society. The policy of the Ming Dynasty also emphasized the need for neutrality in its dealings with the three main religions of its time.

A Cross-Cultural Study of Premodern States

We coded the good governance attributes across a worldwide sample of 30 premodern polities, and subsequent [archaeological](#) work by us and others has provided additional pertinent data. We also considered other variables that we hypothesized might enrich our understanding of the causes and consequences of mutual benefit and good governance; for example, we coded for demographic trends, which are population growth/loss, material standard of living of households, and the frequency of political struggles and organized opposition to state policies and practices. We also coded the relative severity of social, demographic, and agricultural changes after the collapse of the four polities.

Was Western Political History Really Unique?

Armed with a new theory, good governance measures to evaluate it, and a vast array of descriptive studies available from ethnographic, historical, and archaeological sources, we dwelled on the question: Was Western political history

really unique? We know that coercive and autocratic states did exist in the past, as they still do today, but were there also experiments in state-building, outside of Western history, which were based on contingent mutual benefit and good governance, and were they similar to democracy? The coding of good governance variables yielded a surprising answer to this question as we were able to identify such experiments.

Although there is considerable variation in the details of governance across these cases, we identified forms of governing outside of Western history in which the central force guiding political change was contingent on the bond of obligation between governing authorities and subjects rather than on coercion. Further, in such cases, we also found that mutual benefit and good governance brought numerous advantageous downstream consequences for their respective populations.

For example, compared with the more autocratic and coercive states, the collectively organized polities were more politically stable, in part because public safety was greatly enhanced, there were far fewer episodes of anti-state movements (although disgruntled elites often would militate against the more egalitarian and inclusive policies), and there was a reduction in the frequency of internal conflicts between ethnic groups or religious groups.

As a result of these outcomes, resulting in part from the fact that states organized based on mutual benefit and good governance, citizens were provided with opportunities to engage in cooperative social interactions and alignments that could bridge social, cultural, and economic cleavages. Good governance, for one, was a fertile ground for commercial growth in the form of marketplace economies that provided new opportunities and increased living standards for buyers and sellers irrespective of wealth, patrimony, or rural-urban setting. Marketplace economies grew alongside other institutional outcomes, including open recruitment to positions of governing authority, which provided entirely new pathways to social mobility for the public. Well-organized and more livable cities, which were easy to navigate, also enhanced possibilities for commingling, cooperative interactions, and bridged social alignments weakening the likelihood of antagonism between different groups.

The collective action theory is an action-oriented framework that focuses on the idea that diverse webs of cooperative action in society are engendered by the

palpable social actions of persons who want to realize collective benefits. In relation to leadership, this requires a display of commitment to carrying out the necessary and often challenging work of good governance.

Patterns of Stability and Collapse: Three Counterintuitive Discoveries

To confirm that premodern governments could, in some respects, display features that we associate with contemporary democracy was itself a surprise, but we discovered other unanticipated aspects of premodern governance:

Endurability: Despite the obvious advantages in cases where we see a focus on mutual benefit and good governance, their focal periods (the period when a particular set of policies and principles remained stable) were only slightly longer, at 166 years on average, compared to the more autocratic polities with focal periods of 152 years, a difference that is not statistically significant. In addition, polities built more strongly around mutual benefit occurred relatively infrequently (only 27 percent of our sample had consistently high scores for good governance). This shows that despite the advantages of mutual benefit and good governance, they have been difficult to build and sustain in the long run.

Collapse Patterns: Further, while providing many more benefits to their citizens compared to autocratic polities, states that organized to achieve good governance also had more of a collapse pattern than polities that scored lower on good governance. That pattern includes the emergence of damaging factional struggles for power, the loss of fiscal viability of the state, and even food shortages and demographic decline.

Collapse in the case of autocracies brought less serious consequences because, lacking much in the way of governance, groups such as neighborhoods, ethnic groups, and rural communities were already organized at the local level to respond to hazards. Yet, this fragmented form of adaptation was itself problematic, precluding coordinated responses to, for example, urban fires, lawlessness, or the actions of wealthy entrepreneurs who, lacking any opposition from a well-organized authority, were in a position to [distort](#) fair marketplace pricing.

Initiating Collapse: Earlier we mentioned the separation of religion and state because, although violating its premise was not the only misstep exhibited by the respective leaderships, it was among the most damaging. In Ming China, collapse

followed the actions of leaders of the mid-16th century, including the Chia-ching Emperor, who became so obsessed with Daoist ceremonies and alchemy that he neglected his duties; his successor, the Wanli Emperor, turned his attention to gaining personal wealth, a violation of long-standing prohibitions. In the case of the Mughals, the fourth emperor, convinced by Muslim leaders, abandoned religious neutrality, even taxing Hindus more than Muslims and permitting the destruction of new temples. The Roman Emperor Commodus lacked interest in governing and became an avid performer as a gladiator. He identified himself with the god Hercules. Following his failed reign, the empire devolved into a chaotic and corrupt system in which, as the historian Ramsay MacMullen [concluded](#), “relationships involving anything other than the wish for material possession had no chance to develop.”

The case of Venice is particularly troubling in light of what has transpired in recent years in the U.S. Although the Venetian government possessed the institutional capacity to impeach leaders, when Doge Giovanni Cornaro and his family broke the religious neutrality and other rules, for example, as a result of his son accepting the position of Bishop of Bergamo, the governing council refused to impeach him. This action, regarded by many inside and outside of the government as a violation of long-standing rules, was not corrected, and the governing council’s response to criticism was to double down on its authority. These moves, [according](#) to the historian John Norwich made the council ever more unpopular both with the citizens and other organs of government and precipitated a rapid unwinding of the societal threads that had, for centuries, underpinned inclusive forms of cooperation and devotion to a governing system that aimed to realize the common good.

It is important to note that these polities had developed the governing capacity to productively address various expressions of social malfeasance, including administrative corruption and shirking and free riding among citizens that could challenge the confidence of people in each other and the government. Yet, when it was the leadership that turned away from meeting expectations—including diligence in sustaining a system of governance and maintaining its religious neutrality—all the governments in question illustrated a key vulnerability: they lacked the institutional capacity to punish leadership displaying self-serving acts contrary to the pursuit of societal benefit.

Moral Collapse and Its Relevance to Contemporary U.S. Politics

Like the societies we have discussed, the original charters of the U.S. government featured mutual moral obligations between governing authorities and citizens at their core and specified key governing precepts, including the rule of law, the peaceful transfer of power, inclusion, checks and balances on the concentration of power, and the separation of church and state. Over more than two centuries, these principles, although sometimes opposed, have largely been followed. But now they face serious challenges from the presumptive leadership of the Republican Party and influential governing bodies including the Supreme Court.

These challengers reject the notions of inclusiveness and lawfulness embedded in the original charters in a way that does not align with what the majority of American citizens believe and would like to preserve. In particular, challengers deviate from broad sensibilities both when they show strong support for the idea that white nationalist ideologies and religious fundamentalism should serve as the religious foundation for our governing practices and principles, and when they assert their belief that violence is an acceptable means to achieve political goals in the face of opposition.

We hope that our discussion of historical cases is a reminder that mutual benefit and good governance succeed or fail based on the choices of contingently cooperative citizens. Contingency implies that, as in Venice and the other cases we pointed out, the loss of citizen confidence in the leadership can trigger an unexpected unwinding of the societal threads that underpin inclusive forms of cooperation and devotion to a governing system designed to realize common good.

By Richard E. Blanton, Gary M. Feinman, Stephen A. Kowalewski, and Lane F. Fargher-Navarro

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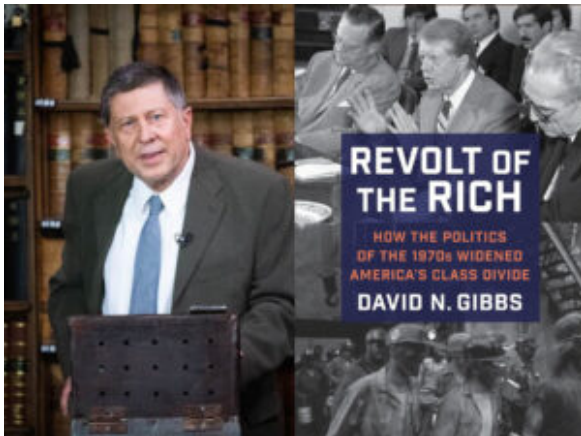
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Neoliberal Policies Associated With Reaganomics Actually Started With Carter



*Historian David N. Gibbs ~
University of Arizona*

09-03-2024 ~ *Historian David N. Gibbs, author of "The Revolt of the Rich," says we mustn't whitewash President Carter's record.*

Research has long established strong links between neoliberal policies and increasing rates of inequality. [Susan George](#), for instance, argued quite convincingly that increasing inequality stems from the neoliberal practices of placing public wealth into private hands, enforcing huge tax cuts for the rich and suppressing wages for average workers. And a [recent study](#) by psychology researchers shows that neoliberalism has resulted in both preferences and

support for greater income inequality. Moreover, the study in question argues that the culprit for the impact on attitudes is “Thatcherism.” Indeed, most researchers place the origins of the neoliberal counterrevolution in the postwar era with the policies initiated by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the U.K. and the U.S., respectively.

However, a new book by the historian [David N. Gibbs](#), titled, [The Revolt of the Rich: How the Politics of the 1970s Widened America’s Class Divide](#), contends that we should look to the administrations of Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter in particular for setting up the foundations for the launching of the neoliberal counterrevolution in the United States. As such, as its author points out in this exclusive interview for *Truthout*, too much credit has been assigned to the Thatcher-Reagan duo for the end of the Keynesian social democratic approach to government and economics. As Gibbs says, “We should not whitewash Carter’s record” as he was “certainly no friend to the working class.” Gibbs is professor of history at the University of Arizona.

C. J. Polychroniou: The first three decades of the postwar era were marked by substantial economic growth and shared prosperity. Indeed, income gains were evenly distributed and the gap between those high up on the income ladder and those at the middle and bottom did not experience much change. However, economic growth slowed down during the second half of the 1970s and the income gap widened, with the very top earners pulling much further ahead since — to the point that current inequality levels today are close to those observed during the Gilded Age. The general consensus is that neoliberal policies have been at the root of extreme inequality, and the major beneficiaries of these policies are indeed the dominant classes. Moreover, the conventional view is that the first wave of neoliberalism begins in the 1980s with Reaganomics and Thatcherism, but in your recently published book, The Revolt of the Rich, you argue that it was actually the Nixon administration that laid the groundwork for the shift to a conservative economic platform, and that it was the Carter administration in turn that ushered in the first wave of neoliberalism.

Can you briefly describe some of the actions that the Nixon administration took to build up political momentum for the advance of right-wing economics and what forces were involved in the rightward transformation of U.S. politics? And how did the labor movement and the progressive forces of the time respond to the rise of economic conservatism and the revolt of the rich?

David N. Gibbs: Richard Nixon aspired to be a transformational president, one who would overturn the regulated capitalism inherited from the New Deal, in favor of a free market revolution. He was influenced by the laissez faire worldview of the University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman, whom Nixon admired. Though Friedman never held any official position, he acted as an informal adviser to the administration. Associates of Friedman were appointed to key positions in the Departments of Treasury, Agriculture and Justice, as well as the Council of Economic Advisors, often at the recommendation of Friedman himself. Their association with the presidency helped to elevate the prestige of Friedmanite economics, a prestige that endured long after Nixon left the scene.

To amplify Friedman's message, Nixon relied on a rightist intellectual network, focused on the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), a free market bastion. The president leaned on corporate executives to increase their funding of AEI, building it up as a Washington powerhouse. At the same time, the president encouraged executives to defund the centrist Brookings Institution and other rivals to the rising AEI.

Simultaneously, Nixon mobilized social conservatives and evangelical Christians against the cultural changes of this period, including such "immoral" developments as homosexuality, abortion rights and secularism in public life. Nixon was extremely clever in melding together business and social conservatives to give conservatism a mass base of voters, forging what would soon become an unbeatable coalition.

Having laid the political groundwork, Nixon was never able to fully implement his radical vision for the future. His career was cut short by Watergate, followed by his 1974 resignation. However, the business forces that the president had unleashed developed a momentum of their own, which endured and accelerated even after he left office.

Corporate America would engage in a massive influence campaign throughout the 1970s after Watergate, using a dense network of think tanks, lobby groups and publicity agencies to spread their message, while Friedman and his academic colleagues would furnish the guiding principles. The campaign that Nixon set in motion would ultimately transform U.S. public policy, mostly toward the end of the decade.

What is surprising is how little opposition there was to the rightward campaign. The labor movement had lost its most dynamic leaders during the Red Scare of the 1940s and 1950s. Much of the remaining union leadership, especially George Meany of the AFL-CIO, were ineffective. Organized labor seemed much more interested in advancing anti-communist unions overseas, often in cooperation with the CIA, than they were in defending worker rights in the United States.

Many new progressive groups emerged during the 1970s, but these focused on noneconomic issues for the most part, involving race, gender and sexuality, as well as environmentalism. And the diverse progressive groups were unable to work together in a broad coalition, which limited their influence. As a result, there was no serious effort to oppose the corporate-led assault on the New Deal.

One conclusion I have drawn is that the right was far better at political strategy than the left. When the right plays the game of politics, they play to win, and they usually do.

The 1970s saw a period of détente between the United States and the Soviet Union. But in your book, you also point out there were powerful forces — such as the military-industrial complex, corporate interests and the Israel lobby — that worked against détente and favored militarism. Do you see a relationship between militarism and the general turn to right-wing economics?

The 1970s produced an elite campaign aimed at increasing military spending and reinvigorating U.S. militarism after its failures in Vietnam, as well as ending détente with the Soviet Union. The lead group in this campaign was the Committee on the Present Danger (CPD), backed by a wide range of corporate interests, especially weapons producers, as well as the Israel lobby. The CPD campaign was so successful that there was a major increase in military spending, which began toward the end of the Carter presidency and continued into the Reagan presidency, producing the largest peacetime military buildup in U.S. history. The rise in military spending had important effects on the domestic economy by diverting funds away from social programs aimed at helping the indigent.

The economic crises of this period produced deep cuts in federal spending for virtually all areas, consistent with neoliberal doctrines of budgetary austerity, but the military was exempted. The military-industrial complex benefited from this

budgetary generosity. The government thus pursued a policy of militarism, to the benefit of corporate America and at the expense of the lowest income groups.

Chapter five of your book is titled "The Rich Go Global." How does neoliberalism relate to globalization? Is there a causation or even a correlation?

The main objective of the corporate campaign was to overturn the regulated capitalism inherited from the New Deal and replace it with laissez faire capitalism. The New Deal system had been extended internationally through the 1944 Bretton Woods agreement, which laid out the postwar economic architecture. Central to Bretton Woods was that currency exchange rates would be regulated by the International Monetary Fund, a newly created public institution, reducing the role of financial speculators. The purpose was to enable full employment and redistributionist policies to proceed at a global level, unimpeded by destabilizing financial speculation.

The Bretton Woods system was dismantled in the early 1970s, thus deregulating international finance. We can credit this change to years of lobbying by bankers and conservative economists, led by the ubiquitous Friedman. The IMF lost its regulatory function, while private bankers regained their influence. Speculation in currency trading exploded, producing windfalls for bankers.

The deregulation of international finance led to what has been termed the "financialization" of the U.S. domestic economy. As a result of financialization, investors could make quick profits by engaging in speculation (typically selling off dollars, while purchasing stronger currencies), rather than through long-term investments in manufacturing. And there was usually a government bailout waiting for the banks when speculative ventures ended badly.

The new, deregulated system had a negative impact on industry, eliminating many high-paying factory jobs which were offshored to low-wage countries. This process was facilitated by the free flow of capital across borders, made possible by deregulation. The New Deal system was thus replaced by a very conservative form of globalization, one that worked against the U.S. working class.

I think it is a widely accepted fact that Jimmy Carter was, from the beginning, a conservative Democrat, but it isn't typically acknowledged that he ushered in the age of neoliberalism. Can you talk about the sort of neoliberal economic policies that Carter enforced and why you think he subordinated U.S. society to the logic

and power of “free markets?”

The move toward free market economics was finally implemented during the presidency of Jimmy Carter. While Nixon had laid the foundations for a later conservative transformation, it was President Carter who first set forth these policies on a large scale. He was keenly focused on removing industrial regulations inherited from the New Deal.

A central figure was Carter’s deregulation adviser, Alfred Kahn, a Cornell University professor. I have examined Kahn’s private papers and was stunned by the intensity of his anti-labor ideology. Under the influence of Kahn, Carter deregulated multiple industrial sectors, beginning with airlines, which had the effect of permanently reducing wages. Carter also deregulated domestic finance, intensifying the process of financialization begun during Nixon’s presidency, with additional negative effects on wage earners.

Carter’s economic conservatism was expressed in multiple domains, including regressive taxation “reforms,” which increased the tax burden on wage earners, while it reduced taxation of investors. And Carter began the process of using monetary policy as a means of fighting inflation by reducing wages and increasing unemployment. He was certainly no friend to the working class.

Your book makes it quite clear that the neoliberal policies associated with Reaganomics and Thatcherism actually started with Carter. Why is it then that neoliberalism in the U.S. has been pinned on Ronald Reagan?

According to popular mythology, Carter was a relatively centrist figure, while Reagan was a right-wing ideologue; it was Reagan who inaugurated the neoliberal era in economic policy, according to this view. But the reality is that Reagan only intensified a rightward turn that was already in full swing under Carter. Why the persistence of this myth, that Carter was a political moderate? I think the reason is that Reagan used conservative, ideological language to justify his policies, proudly emphasizing his free market orientation, so he received all the credit for America’s right turn in economic policy, while Carter preferred non-ideological language, which masked the essentially Friedmanite character of his economic program.

Another factor influencing public perception has been Carter’s post-presidency, which is very impressive. But Carter must also be judged on the basis of his

presidency, which transformed the country in a far more inegalitarian direction than had been the case previously. We should not whitewash Carter's record.

How do we explain the lasting impact of the revolt of the rich?

The long-term impact of the revolt of the rich has been to elevate the influence of money in U.S. politics. I emphasize the importance of what has been termed "deep lobbying," which seeks to influence public opinion. Deep lobbying goes well beyond the traditional conception of lobbying that focuses on short-term goals, such as advancing specific pieces of legislation. The purpose of deep lobbying is to transform politics over the long term by altering the climate of discussion. The upsurge of deep lobbying in the 1970s permanently shifted the balance of power toward the economic elite; it was an elite takeover.

An outstanding example of deep lobbying is the contemporary role of Charles Koch of Koch Industries and a series of Koch-connected billionaires who have used their vast wealth to set up free market think tanks at hundreds of colleges and universities across the United States, including at my own institution, the University of Arizona. Koch's aim is to use educational institutions to spread free market ideas and to deepen still further the laissez faire revolution begun in the 1970s.

While everyone has focused on the superficial culture wars, Koch has been promoting laissez faire economics, deregulation and income inequality. The beauty of deep lobbying is that it is done through stealth, so it does not even look like lobbying.

The main impact of the revolt of the rich was to make the United States a far less democratic country.

Source:

<https://truthout.org/articles/neoliberal-policies-associated-with-reaganomics-actually-started-with-carter/>

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PVV Blog 11 ~ The Ideology Of The PVV In Practice: Conclusion



09-02-2024 ~ In this final episode of the series, I conclude my reflections and venture a prediction on how the new government, with its PVV contingent, will fare. The reason for ending the series is twofold. Firstly, I have based this series on my earlier work on the PVV, as expressed in my books [*De ideologie van de PVV. Het kwade goed en het goede kwaad*](#) (2012) and [*The Dutch Party for Freedom. An Analysis of Geert Wilders' Thinking on Islam*](#) (2012). I noticed that everything I had noted and analyzed in the books regarding the PVV's ideology had become almost exhausted. In this series, I have extensively discussed the

positions and considerations that party leader Wilders and party ideologue Bosma once committed to paper, which I analyzed in both books. Secondly, I notice that all the points I have discussed now also frequently appear in the national and international press. It seems that what I wrote about in 2012 has now become common knowledge in the reporting of the PVV-critical press. And that, of course, gives me much satisfaction. The press is aware of the very poor democratic structure of the PVV; they know of the now more than ever unhidden agenda of the PVV to make the Netherlands, and preferably all of Europe, Islam-free and thus Muslim-free. Of the close relationships the PVV maintains with like-minded individuals in Europe, such as Marine Le Pen of the French Rassemblement National and Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán of the Fidesz party. This series will remain online for the time being, but it will also be published in full on my [website](#) and on my [Academia page](#), both in Dutch and English, and perhaps later in French and Arabic as well.

The New Government

The [debate on the government declaration](#) on July 3 and 4 already led to a significant clash between the newly minted Prime Minister Dick Schoof and PVV leader Wilders, which I reported on in the [previous episode](#) of this blog. The prime minister identified himself in his observations with the later Dutch Olympic champion marathon runner Sifan Hassan, of Ethiopian origin, saying he considered her someone who belongs to society. The prime minister has so far acted inclusively ('everyone is part of society'), and I have yet to catch him making an 'exclusive' statement ('us versus them').

Furthermore, the ministers from the PVV are confronted with the daily realities of governance. Minister Agema of Health reported that she could do little or nothing to keep [a hospital in Heerlen](#), in the south of the country, open, even though she repeatedly argued as a Member of Parliament at the time that hospitals should not be closed and that the government should take the necessary measures to prevent this.

Minister Faber of Migration and Asylum told the press that there is an '[asylum crisis](#),' on the basis of which the government would no longer be obliged to take in asylum seekers or would be able to refuse them. However, the minister had to temper her words within a few hours.

I believe that the PVV ministers are, as it were, caught in the web of the reality of

daily governance and are confronted with the sometimes-limited possibilities that exist, both administratively and financially, to realize the PVV's agenda. Moreover, the PVV is one of four political parties in the government and potentially faces three other parties. While the PVV may find itself in the center of power, it is not alone.

The Troublemaker Wilders

The only real and also powerful troublemaker is party leader Geert Wilders, who continues to express his still unabashedly populist and racist views from the sidelines, particularly on X (formerly Twitter). A simple look at his [X timeline](#) shows the reader that he is no less fierce than in the past.

The question is what happens next. I think this cabinet is seriously trying to work on its program, and we will see (as they say in Dutch) that the soup is not eaten as hot as it is served. The PVV ministers are bound by the coalition agreement, and that certainly does not consist solely of pure PVV points of view. Prime Minister Dick Schoof will continue to act inclusively, and this will lead to a further deterioration of the relationship between him and Geert Wilders in the future.

No Physical PVV Power Base

PVV leader Wilders will also be confronted with the fact that he has never bothered to give his party more structure. Like-minded parties such as the Rassemblement National and Fidesz in Hungary have a well-developed party apparatus, with a party office, a youth wing, and a scientific bureau. The PVV has none of these. The PVV is a party where Geert Wilders is the only human member. But now that he is in the center of power, this would have been the chance to gain more influence than ever. But if you only have a phone (that is never answered), an email address, and a website, and no manpower at your disposal, and on top of that, if you have to or want to do almost everything alone, then you miss the opportunity to build power. But who knows, maybe PVV leader Wilders will gain new insights and start building. But I think it will be too late.

The Future of the Netherlands

Thus, the Netherlands faces a potentially turbulent time. I will continue to follow the cabinet from the sidelines, and I have full confidence that others will continue to critically monitor the PVV and this government. I hope the damage this government can do to society will be limited. Time will tell.

All

episodes:

<https://rozenbergquarterly.com/pvv-blog-introduction-the-dutch-party-for-freedom-an-analysis-of-geert-wilders-thinking-on-islam/>

Labor Militancy Is The Only Way To Increase Union Membership



*Agitated workers face the factory owner in *The Strike*, painted by Robert Koehler in 1886*

09-01-2024 ~ *We need to rebuild the labor movement, and that means not going back to the kind of unions that existed in the postwar era. We need unions with a radical vision, unions that exert power in the workplace and society.*

With Labor Day 2024 upon us, it is important to critically reflect on the current state of the U.S. labor movement and the challenges that it faces in an environment where Big Business dominates the economy and mainstream society continues to abide allegiance to the values of a Lockean political culture in which ruthless individualism reigns supreme. To put it mildly, without a strong labor movement and a public spirit guiding our institutions, the country will never succeed in realizing the vision of a just and fair society.

However, the news on the labor front is not very encouraging. The share of U.S.

workers who belong to a union has been declining since the early 1980s—an era which coincides with the full swing of the neoliberal counterrevolution and deindustrialization. In [1983](#), the first year for which comparable data are available, the union membership rate was 20.1 percent and declined to 11.1 percent in 2015.

In [2021](#), the union membership rate was 10.3 percent and dropped to 10.1 percent in 2022. In [2023](#), union membership declined even further to 10.0 percent, which is a [historic low](#).

The irony is that the United States has seen a “union boom” over the last couple of years. Thousands of employees at [Starbucks](#) stores across the country have voted to unionize and workers at [Amazon warehouses](#) and [Trader Joe’s](#), [grad students](#), and [Uber and Lyft](#) drivers also joined the unionization fight. But the data, as cited above, tells a different story. The share of U.S. workers belonging to a union continues to decline and is now at the lowest rate in history. Today, organized labor in the United States is dominated by [public-sector employees](#), which is more than five times higher than the 6 percent rate of private-sector employees.

The [United States](#) is near the bottom among industrialized democracies when it comes to union membership rates. The average level of union membership across the [European Union](#) (EU) is 23 percent, but the average is held down by relatively low levels of membership in some large EU states, such as Germany with 18 percent and France with 8 percent. However, even in countries where union density is lower, such as in France, virtually all workers are covered by a collective bargaining agreement. In Denmark, Sweden and Finland, union density is 70 percent. Incidentally, the Nordic countries consistently rank among the happiest nations in the world. In the latest [World Happiness Report](#), the United States doesn’t even make the top 20 list. Trade union density is even higher in [Africa](#) and most parts of Asia than it is in the United States.

Why is union membership in the United States so low? This is something of an anomaly considering the fact that [polls](#) consistently reveal that majorities of U.S. adults see the decline in union membership as bad for the country and for working people. It is mostly ultra-conservatives and reactionary think tanks like the [Hoover Institution](#) that believe that the decline of unions is good news.

Globalization, technology, and the transformation of an industrial economy into a service-oriented society are the most common reasons offered for the decline of U.S. unions. However, these explanations, even when put together, are not sufficient in explaining why the U.S. has one of the lowest union membership rates in the world. [Europe](#) is much more open than the United States, according to the International Monetary Fund. Thus, globalization alone cannot be an explanation for the general decline in unionization in the U.S. Europe's technology lags behind the U.S., but it is not technology but rather institutional arrangements and intentional policy decisions that succeed in altering in significant ways the balance between capital and labor that can explain why union membership has plateaued at 10 percent among workers in the United States. We must acknowledge that neoliberalism itself is not a monolithic process; rather, it is affected by a variety of domestic pressures and thus plays out differently in different national contexts.

In the U.S., it is politics—manifested in the form of a vicious class struggle orchestrated from the economic elite and its supporters—that keeps workers from joining or creating a union. The basic rights of U.S. workers to unionize and engage in collective bargaining have been under attack throughout the history of U.S. capitalism. [Strikes](#) figured prominently during the height of the industrialization era and well into the twentieth century, with immigrant workers from Ireland, Italy and Germany being at the forefront of labor radicalism, but so did employer and government violence directed against striking workers. The U.S. has the [most violent labor history](#) in the western world. The U.S. government may be the only government in the industrialized world that has engaged in systematic [massacres of striking workers](#).

The National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), also known as the Wagner Act, was passed in July 1935. The [Act](#), whose broad intention was to guarantee employees “the right to self-organization, to form, join, or assist labor organizations, to bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing, and to engage in concerted activities for the purpose of collective bargaining or other mutual aid and protection” was probably instrumental in the dramatic increase in unionization rates that was witnessed from the late 1930s to the 1950s, hitting its apex at 32 percent; yet, its failures are well established and can, conversely, be attributed to the decline in private sector unionization rates that started taking place following their [peak](#) in the late 1950s. In fact, NLRA, however ironic this

may sound, may be responsible for the creation of “[a vibrant non-union sector instead](#).”

The Supreme Court, of course, has also been instrumental in creating a “vibrant non-union sector.” The Court has consistently made decisions that limit union power, including the right to strike. Rather typical here was the stance taken by the [union-busting Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor](#) when she said that employees who strike in support of union bargaining “[gamble](#)” their jobs.

Indeed, in no other country in the western world has the [right to strike](#) been as severely undermined as in the U.S. In fact, U.S. labor law is an outright failure when it comes to safeguarding one of the key International Labor Organization (ILO) principles, which is to guarantee the right to strike, as it allows employers to enjoy [the right to replace workers](#) who strike for better wages and conditions.

Indeed, in no other country in the western world is anti-union consulting as huge of an industry as it is in the United States. As shocking as it may sound, it’s estimated that employers spend more than \$400 million per year in hiring “[union-avoidance](#)” consultants.

Moreover, “the party of the people” is equally guilty for throwing U.S. workers under the bus. All three living Democratic presidents ([Jimmy Carter](#), Barack Obama, and Bill Clinton) [let down unions](#) and certainly were no friends to working people. In fact, they worked ceaselessly to promote neoliberalism and overall policies that were a disaster for labor, with [Clinton](#) leading the pack.

But no narrative for the dismal state of unionization in the U.S. can be fully complete if the role that unions themselves played in undermining the vision and the goals of the labor movement can be left out. As David N. Gibbs points out in his outstanding book [The Revolt of the Rich](#), the largest union in the country, the AFL-CIO, “was conceived on very conservative terms as an institutional reaction against leftist strains within the labor movement” and one of its main activities was working with the Central Intelligence Agency in fighting communism both at home and abroad. Getting rid of class struggle unionism was a primary objective of the AFL-CIO even when the union had begun its steady decline. Worse still, the [ties between mafia and labor unions](#), which go back to the early 1930s, had reached such a high point by the late 1950 that government investigation on labor racketeering got underway that in the ensuing decades would lead to convictions

of major labor leader and mob figures. As James B. Jacobs argues in [Mobsters, Unions, and the Feds: The Mafia and the American Labor Movement](#), “labor racketeering” was a major feature of U.S. organized labor and contributed in a very big way to the decline of U.S. trade unionism.

The U.S. labor movement has been experiencing a renaissance of sorts over the last few years, although the truth of the matter is that union membership remains stagnant. The challenges ahead are indeed immense as there is no alternative left party in the U.S. and no social democratic traditions which rely on trade unions for softening the injustices inflicted by the capitalist system. U.S. capitalism is brutal and the reactionary forces, which lead all the way up to the Supreme Court, are extremely powerful, well organized, and massively funded.

Yet, we need unions as they are absolutely a critical force in the struggle to create a fair and just society. We need to rebuild the labor movement, and that means not going back to the kind of unions that existed in the postwar era. We need unions with a radical vision, unions that exert power in the workplace and society. There is no reason why a service-based economy, which is mainly associated with low wages and insecure employment, should offer less opportunities for union membership. In this context, there is much to learn from the experience of the [Union of Southern Service Workers](#), a union that doesn't shy away from taking militant action on the job against low pay and dangerous work conditions and to demand a seat at the table.

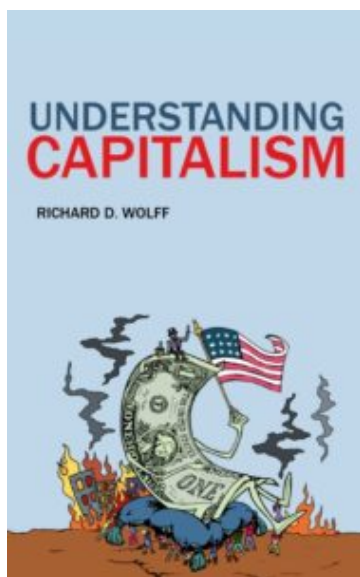
Rejecting business unionism and renewing in turn [labor militancy](#) is the only way to increase union membership and fight back labor exploitation and inequality.

Source: <https://www.commondreams.org/opinion/labor-day-union-militancy>

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Why Poverty Reduction Under Capitalism Is A Myth



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08-27-2024 ~From its beginnings, the capitalist economic system produced both critics and celebrants, those who felt victimized and those who felt blessed. Where victims and critics developed analyses, demands, and proposals for change, beneficiaries, and celebrants developed alternative discourses defending the system.

Certain kinds of arguments proved widely effective against capitalism's critics and in obtaining mass support. These became capitalism's basic supportive myths. One such myth is that capitalism created prosperity and reduced poverty.

Capitalists and their biggest fans have long argued that the system is an engine of wealth creation. Capitalism's early boosters, such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo, and likewise capitalism's early critics such as Karl Marx, recognized that

fact. Capitalism is a system built to grow.

Because of market competition among capitalist employers, “growing the business” is necessary, most of the time, for it to survive. Capitalism is a system driven to grow wealth, but wealth creation is not unique to capitalism. The idea that only capitalism creates wealth or that it does so more than other systems is a myth.

What else causes wealth production? There are a whole host of other contributors to wealth. It’s never only the economic system, whether capitalist or feudal or slave or socialist. Wealth creation depends on all kinds of circumstances in history (such as raw materials, weather, or inventions) that determine if and how fast wealth is created. All of those factors play roles alongside that of the particular economic system in place.

When the USSR imploded in 1989, some claimed that capitalism had “defeated” its only real competitor—socialism—proving that capitalism was the greatest possible creator of wealth. The “end of history” had been reached, it was said, at least in relation to economic systems. Once and for all, nothing better than capitalism could be imagined, let alone achieved.

The myth here is a common mistake and grossly overused. While wealth was created in significant quantities over the last few centuries *as* capitalism spread globally, that does not prove it was capitalism that *caused* the growth in wealth. Maybe wealth grew despite capitalism. Maybe it would have grown faster with some other system. Evidence for that possibility includes two important facts. First, the fastest economic growth (as measured by GDP) in the 20th century was that achieved by the USSR. And second, the fastest growth in wealth in the 21st century so far is that of the People’s Republic of China. Both of those societies rejected capitalism and proudly defined themselves as socialist.

Another version of this myth, especially popular in recent years, claims capitalism deserves credit for bringing many millions out of poverty over the last 200 to 300 years. In this story, capitalism’s wealth creation brought everyone a higher standard of living with better food, wages, job conditions, medicine and health care, education, and scientific advancements. Capitalism supposedly gave huge gifts to the poorest among us and deserves our applause for such magnificent social contributions.

The problem with this myth is like that with the wealth-creation myth discussed above. Just because millions escaped poverty during capitalism's global spread does not prove that capitalism is the reason for this change. Alternative systems could have enabled an escape from poverty during the same period of time, or for more people more quickly, because they organized production and distribution differently.

Capitalism's profit focus has often held back the distribution of products to drive up their prices and, therefore, profits. Patents and trademarks of profit-seeking businesses effectively slow the distribution of all sorts of products. We cannot know whether capitalism's incentive effects outweigh its slowing effects. Claims that, overall, capitalism promotes rather than slows progress are pure ideological assertions. Different economic systems—capitalism included—promote and delay development in different ways at different speeds in their different parts.

Capitalists and their supporters have almost always opposed measures designed to lessen or eliminate poverty. They blocked minimum wage laws often for many years, and when such laws were passed, they blocked raising the minimums (as they have done in the United States since 2009). Capitalists similarly opposed laws outlawing or limiting child labor, reducing the length of the working day, providing unemployment compensation, establishing government pension systems such as Social Security, providing a national health insurance system, challenging gender and racial discrimination against women and people of color, or providing a universal basic income. Capitalists have led opposition to progressive tax systems, occupational safety and health systems, and free universal education from preschool through university. Capitalists have opposed unions for the last 150 years and likewise restricted collective bargaining for large classes of workers. They have opposed socialist, communist, and anarchist organizations aimed at organizing the poor to demand relief from poverty.

The truth is this: to the extent that poverty has been reduced, it has happened *despite* the opposition of capitalists. To credit capitalists and capitalism for the reduction in global poverty is to invert the truth. When capitalists try to take credit for the poverty reduction that was achieved against their efforts, they count on their audiences not knowing the history of fighting poverty in capitalism.

Recent claims that capitalism overcame poverty are often based on misinterpretations of certain data. For example, the United Nations defines

extreme poverty as an income of under \$1.97 per day. The number of poor people living on under \$1.97 per day has decreased markedly in the last century. But one country, China—the world’s largest by population—has experienced one of the greatest escapes from poverty in the world in the last century, and therefore, has an outsized influence on all totals. Given China’s huge influence on poverty measures, one could claim that reduced global poverty in recent decades results from an economic system that insists it is *not* capitalist but rather socialist.

Economic systems are eventually evaluated according to how well or not they serve the society in which they exist. How each system organizes the production and distribution of goods and services determines how well it meets its population’s basic needs for health, safety, sufficient food, clothing, shelter, transport, education, and leisure to lead a decent, productive work-life balance. How well is modern capitalism performing in that sense?

Modern capitalism has now accumulated around 100 individuals in the world who together own more wealth than the bottom half of this planet’s population (over 3.5 billion people). Those hundred richest people’s financial decisions have as much influence over how the world’s resources are used as the financial decisions of 3.5 billion, the poorest half of this planet’s population. That is why the poor die early in a world of modern medicine, suffer from diseases that we know how to cure, starve when we produce more than enough food, lack education when we have plenty of teachers, and experience so much more tragedy. Is this what reducing poverty looks like?

Crediting capitalism for poverty reduction is another myth. Poverty was reduced by the poor’s struggle against a poverty reproduced systemically by capitalism and capitalists. Moreover, the poor’s battles were often aided by militant working-class organizations, including pointedly anti-capitalist organizations.

By Richard D. Wolff

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Source: Independent Media Institute

Credit Line: This adapted excerpt from Richard D. Wolff's book [Understanding Capitalism](#) (*Democracy at Work*, 2024) was produced by [Economy for All](#), a project of the Independent Media Institute.

Harris's Failed Opportunity?



Sonali Kolhatkar

08-26-2024 ~ *Kamala Harris chose to embrace Republican language on the economy even if she backs progressive politics.*

During her nearly 40-minute-long [speech](#) on the final day of the 2024 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Vice President Kamala Harris laid out her economic plan for the nation as “an opportunity economy where everyone has the chance to compete and a chance to succeed.”

I deliberately chose not to watch her speech, preferring instead to read it. The ebullience at this year's DNC was infectious. The Democratic Party is leaning into

some of the language of progressive economic populism and is energized by a younger, more enthusiastic nominee. But reading Harris's speech rather than watching it, helped bring some distance from the joy and clarified that the party is still not embracing the language of progressive economic populism and continues to use the destructive language of the right.

The term "opportunity economy" is itself the problem. It's a phrase that former Senate Majority Leader [Mitch McConnell](#) used to defend Donald Trump's economic agenda in 2019. [Florida's Chamber of Commerce](#), a staunchly pro-business outfit, has used it as well.

The word "opportunity" means a chance, the creation of circumstances to make something possible. We live in a nation where racial segregation is technically illegal, which means people of color have the "opportunity" to attend elite schools, apply for jobs, build wealth, retire comfortably, and pass their wealth to their children. Those opportunities have existed for decades. But data shows over and over that they don't translate into reality, especially for Black and Brown people in the U.S. The [racial wealth gap](#), for example, remains high. There are structural barriers that remain firmly in place, and that require very specific government intervention to dismantle. Will Harris embrace such a dismantling?

Harris proudly related during her DNC [speech](#) that she "took on the big banks, delivered \$20 billion for middle-class families who faced foreclosure, and helped pass a homeowner bill of rights, one of the first of its kind in the nation."

But she took on banks as a prosecutor, not as a legislator or executive. And her homeowner bill of rights was, once more, based on the ideas of "opportunity." In a [2017 op-ed](#) she explained that the bill of rights was based on "six bills designed to give Californians a fair opportunity to work with their banks, modify their loans, and keep their homes."

Harris [pointed](#) out at the DNC that she "stood up for veterans and students being scammed by big, for-profit colleges. For workers who were being cheated out of their wages, the wages they were due. For seniors facing elder abuse." Again, all were commendable achievements made during her role as a prosecutor and Attorney General of California. Will she stand up for the rights of veterans, students, workers, and seniors, or simply afford them opportunities for justice?

There is a huge difference between "opportunities" and "rights." The former is a

pro-corporate, pro-business term that is perfectly consistent with an individualist capitalist economy that has “winners” who make use of opportunities for wealth-building and “losers” who fail to do so. But “rights” is a word that insists on basic standards of fairness that everyone deserves. It encompasses an idea that capitalism hates: that people have the *right* to healthcare, childcare, education, homes, good wages, union jobs, and a stable climate. There are no winners and losers.

There was little talk of such rights at the Convention. In fact, even the [New York Times](#) noticed that Democrats avoided bringing up Medicare-for-All and the idea that everyone—not just a subsection of the population—has the right to taxpayer-funded healthcare. The Times’s Noah Weiland pointed out, “Her avoidance of a policy that had been central to progressive Democratic aspirations underscores how quickly she has sought to define her candidacy while appealing to more moderate voters, and how Medicare-for-All proposals have effectively left the Democratic mainstream for now.”

Instead of asserting that everyone has the right to taxpayer-funded healthcare Harris [said](#), “We are not going back to when Donald Trump tried to cut Social Security and Medicare. We are not going back to when he tried to get rid of the Affordable Care Act when insurance companies could deny people with pre-existing conditions.”

It sounds as though she and her party have given up on expanding government healthcare to all and instead gone on the defense against the Republican Party’s attacks on Medicare and the ACA.

Harris’s second favorite word, after “opportunity” was “[freedom](#).” She used it a dozen times in her speech, recasting “rights” as “freedoms.” She referenced the “The freedom to live safe from gun violence in our schools, communities, and places of worship. The freedom to love who you love openly and with pride.” She also touted, “The freedom to breathe clean air, and drink clean water, and live free from the pollution that fuels the climate crisis. And the freedom that unlocks all the others: the freedom to vote.”

Clearly, Harris was attempting to reclaim the word “freedom” from the GOP, a formation that has been pulled toward the extreme right by Republican lawmakers who label themselves as members of the “[Freedom Caucus](#).” Freedom

is akin to opportunity.

Indeed, Harris's failure to make a full-throated embrace of progressive economic populism was a failed "opportunity." The conditions were ripe for her to lean in to language centered on the rights of people given that we have witnessed a cultural sea change on the failures of capitalism.

This change was apparent at the 2024 DNC as well. One need only examine how Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders was received this year compared to the last two conventions. When Sanders spoke at the 2016 DNC in Philadelphia, his role was to [placate progressives](#) in the party who had supported his candidacy for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination. He urged his voters to back Hillary Clinton, the centrist candidate who would go on to lose the electoral college vote to Donald Trump in spite of winning the popular vote. Only months earlier, [leaked internal emails](#) from the Democratic National Committee revealed just what the party's insiders thought of Sanders—and it wasn't pretty.

Then, four years ago, his role at the 2020 DNC in Wisconsin was to defend Joe Biden's candidacy against Trump. He [remarked](#), "Many of the ideas we fought for, that just a few years ago were considered 'radical,' are now mainstream."

But this year, even though his role was once more to convince his supporters to back a mainstream Democratic candidate, Sanders's prime-time [address](#) at the 2024 DNC in Chicago sounded remarkably mainstream. The [New York Times](#) recognized him as an insider, saying that he seemed to have "a sense of vindication that the Democratic Party, as he sees it, has finally recognized that many progressive causes are broadly popular with Americans."

Sanders hasn't changed, but the party's rhetoric has. Slate's [Alexander Sammon](#) pointed out that, "There were very few themes in Sanders's speech that other Democratic speakers hadn't already covered on Monday and Tuesday." Although the DNC's tenor was markedly different from four and eight years ago—Sanders now sounded like he fit in, largely because the tenor, if not the substance, of his political leanings have become mainstream.

Meanwhile, Harris's language of "opportunity agenda" leans right. She shared at the DNC, "My mother kept a strict budget. We lived within our means. Yet, we wanted for little and she expected us to make the most of the opportunities that were available to us, and to be grateful for them." Such words could easily have

been said by a Republican and reflect the party's ideas about "fiscal responsibility."

Harris also touted a "middle-class tax cut" in attempting to distinguish herself from Trump's tax cuts for the rich. But tax cuts for the middle class is a [core GOP talking point](#)—even if the party usually delivers for the already-rich in spite of its promises to the not-so-rich.

In truth, Harris is likely more economically progressive than she let on. She has [backed](#) the Child Tax Credit, a program that was [popular](#) and remarkably [effective](#). But she made no mention of it at the DNC. Her running mate Minnesota Governor Tim Walz is known for his [economically progressive policies](#).

Granted, party conventions these days appear to be tailored to appease a sliver of the American public: the undecided voters in swing states whose all-important ballots will help determine who wins the electoral college, and thus, the presidency. In the context of such an undemocratic system, politicians will always feel pressure to tack toward the center, as winning the popular vote does not guarantee victory.

But we live at a time when momentum is building for fulfilling the economic "rights" of people via such ideas as [universal basic income plans](#), and [reparations](#) for Black people. A broad movement of progressives has for years demanded that the Democratic Party distinguish itself from the GOP by making a full-throated defense of the values it claimed to stand for. Rather than leaning rightward by using the Republican-style language of "opportunity" and "freedom," the Democratic Party could lean left and center the "rights" of people.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

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immigrant rights organization.

Source: Independent Media Institute

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