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Good Trouble Lives On

BY KATHERINE GARCIA

As new voting restrictions take hold across the country, and congressional and countless state legislatures launch racially-motivated attacks on voting rights, Public Citizen is helping lead a nonpartisan nationwide effort to ensure that every eligible voter can make their voice heard in the 2026 midterm elections.

Through the "Good Trouble Lives On" weekend of action, Public Citizen and its partners are mobilizing communities to register voters, educate the public about changing election rules, and expand civic participation in the face of a coordinated effort to make voting more difficult. The mobilization is organized around the theme "Teach! Reach! Preach!"

The urgency of that work has grown in recent months. This spring, the U.S. Supreme Court eviscerated Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which provided clear, fundamental protections for voters of color. The decision opened the door for states to draw congressional maps that weaken the voting power of Black, Brown, and other historically disenfranchised communities.

At the same time, the Trump administration has repeatedly attempted to sow doubt in our free and fair elections, and has gone as far as harvesting voter data and

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Photo of a 2025 "Good Trouble Lives On" event in Syracuse, N.Y., courtesy of Christine Wood.

The Saga of the Slush Fund: How Trump's Gambit to Reward Allies and Insurrectionists Backfired

BY NANDAN M. JOSHI

Storm the Capitol, get a check from the taxpayers? If President Donald Trump had his way, that's how things would have played out.

Trump and his Department of Justice (DOJ) worked behind closed doors to create an unprecedented $1.776 billion pot of taxpayer dollars to hand out to victims of so-called "Lawfare" and "Weaponization." When news of this scheme broke in May, Public Citizen immediately spoke out against the proposed fund. Fortunately, the public backlash forced Trump's Acting Attorney General Todd Blanche to backtrack on the scheme — at least for now.

TAKING TRUMP TO COURT

The slush fund saga began as an outgrowth of a lawsuit filed by Trump, two of his sons, and the Trump Organization against the Department of the Treasury and Internal Revenue Service (IRS), both of which he controls. In the lawsuit, Trump asked for $10 billion in damages as compensation for an IRS contractor unlawfully

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Profiting Off of $1-a-Day Pay

BY DOUGLAS S. PASTERNAK

In late May, conditions at the Delaney Hall Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention center in Newark, New Jersey, boiled over. Immigrant detainees decried the center's unsanitary conditions, lack of appropriate medical care, and were fed up with the $1 a day they were being paid to provide upkeep to the facility, including cooking, cleaning, and maintenance, that the private for-profit contractor Geo Group, Inc. paid them while it raked in millions in profits.

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GET TO KNOW PUBLIC CITIZEN

SARAH KARLIN-SMITH

An ongoing series profiling Public Citizen leaders and staffers

For 15 years, Sarah Karlin-Smith made a career of explaining how policy decisions made in Washington ripple through doctors' offices, pharmacies, and household budgets. Before joining Public Citizen's Access to Medicines Program as research director in January 2026, she covered health policy and politics for *Politico, FDA News*, and Pink Sheet, and was a regular voice on KFF Health News' "What the Health" podcast. Along the way, she also taught an introductory news writing course at George Washington University, where she helped students think critically about the media they consume and recognize how decisions about what stories get covered.

A graduate of George Washington University in D.C., where she studied journalism, mass communication, and American Studies, Karlin-Smith has lived in Washington for roughly two decades. When not working, she can often be found ferrying her young children around the city on the family e-bike, practicing yoga, or volunteering as an amateur clown who twists balloon animals. Raised in New Jersey, she remains a spirited defender of her home state and keeps a running mental list of its many contributions to the world.

What drew you from reporting on health issues to working on the policy side?

Karlin-Smith: After spending so many years learning and writing about the many problems in the U.S. health care system, it's exciting to have an opportunity to more directly advocate for positive change. The drug industry has so many paid voices working on its behalf in Washington; the public needs strong opposition working in its interests.

What's one misconception the public often has about how drug pricing in the U.S. actually works?

Karlin-Smith: Many people assume that the price of a drug is linked to how much it costs to develop. But drug pricing is not tied to the cost of research and development, and the vast majority of pharma industry revenue is not spent on R&D. Drug companies generally price their medicines to maximize profits, even if it means that many people lack access to needed drugs.

Looking ahead, what developments in drug pricing or access to medicines do you think deserve far more public attention right now—and what gives you hope that meaningful reform is still possible?

Karlin-Smith: Congress giving Medicare the power to negotiate the cost of some drugs was a huge achievement in the U.S. drug pricing space. Now that this program has had a few years to play out and the sky hasn't fallen – that is, innovation and development of new drugs continue – there is an opportunity to build on this momentum. There are a variety of ways to build out the Medicare program to get lower costs on more drugs and include people covered by different health insurance programs.

If you could make RFK Jr. read one book or consume another cultural object, what would it be?

Karlin-Smith: RFK Jr. often seems to operate under the assumption that health is nearly entirely within a person's personal control and pushes policies that align with this belief. I'd want him to read content that shows how much of a person's health is beyond their control and driven by biology and social and economic factors, such as where they live and how much they earn. ■

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Public Citizen is a national nonprofit membership organization based in Washington, D.C. Since its founding by Ralph Nader in 1971, Public Citizen has fought for corporate and government accountability to guarantee the individual's right to safe products, a healthy environment and workplace, fair trade, and clean and safe energy sources. Public Citizen is active in Congress, the courts and government agencies.

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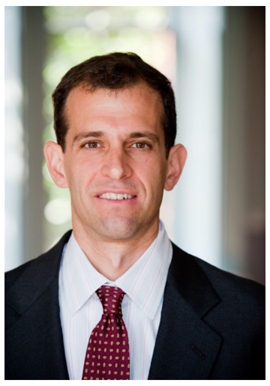
EDITORIAL

Corporate Super PACs Fuel $500M Spending Surge

CO-PRESIDENTS' VIEW
LISA GILBERT AND ROBERT WEISSMAN

Since the Supreme Court's disastrous *Citizens United v FEC* decision a decade and a half ago, we've seen a surge in outside spending in elections, powered by a small number of billionaires and super-rich people. But corporations — the direct beneficiaries of the *Citizens United* decision — have been reluctant to make direct, disclosed contributions to Super PACs and outside spending groups.

No longer. A new Public Citizen report documents a spike in direct corporate spending in elections, totaling more than $500 million in the 2026 election cycle, even before the general election season begins. Corporate spending in the 2026 election is more than one-third of all corporate spending since *Citizens United* was decided, our report found.

What happened? *Citizens United* paved the way for unlimited contributions to outside spending groups — to Super PACs, which disclose their donors, and to secret spending groups, which don't. Contributions from the billionaire class poured into these outside spending groups, which have come to dominate our elections. In contested races, outside spending typically exceeds what the candidates themselves spend — meaning that the billionaire-funded outside groups are able to set the terms of political debate.

However, even though they had the legal authority, most large corporations felt constrained from making large, publicly disclosed contributions to influence elections. A big part of the explanation was probably that corporations believed this kind of political engagement posed risks — that it might push candidates they opposed into taking tougher positions against them, or that consumers might react negatively to their political spending. The prevailing corporate culture dictated not spending from the corporate treasury on elections.

In the last election, however, the cryptocurrency industry made a different bet. Crypto has a huge stake in government policy. The Biden administration determined that core elements of the crypto industry's business model violated existing law, threatening the industry's viability. So crypto decided to spend big in the 2024 elections — and the spending had an effect. Crypto donations helped decide numerous primary races, and crypto spending helped defeat Sen. Sherrod Brown of Ohio. Brown had chaired the Senate Banking Committee and was a crypto critic.

Other industries took note — and the political consultants who helped engineer the crypto strategy pitched other corporations. The result is that, in 2026, two other sectors — online gambling and AI corporations — are engaging in massive election spending, along with a smattering of other companies ideologically motivated to support Donald Trump.

One notable thing about all this spending: The Super PACs supported by these corporations don't advertise on, or even discuss, the issues of concern to their corporate patrons. They don't, for example, urge passage of laws to support the cryptocurrency industry. Instead, the ads talk about "leaders we deserve," border security, infrastructure, claims of fraud — almost anything but the true agenda of the spending businesses.

As bad as this is, we should expect it to get worse. There will be much more spending through the remainder of the 2028 election cycle. And the spread of corporate spending to other sectors risks changing the overall corporate culture, leading more industries and companies to decide they should get in the political spending game in future elections.

The consequences for our democracy couldn't be more severe. Big Money already dominates our elections, but corporations have far more money available to them than even the billionaire class. It would be nothing for a trillion-dollar corporation to spend $200 million or $300 million in a national election, but those are giant sums in the election context. If large corporations in general decide to start spending on elections, the corporate vise grip on politics and policy will grow even tighter.

The only good news is that some candidates are fighting back effectively. They are running on their refusal to accept corporate funding — and criticizing their opponents for fronting for Big Business. In many instances, that political jujitsu is working.

But we need much more systemic solutions than aggressive and creative political campaigning. Public financing of elections is vital. It can create a funding floor for candidates to help counterbalance outside spending by corporations and the super-rich, but even public financing can't offset outside spending adequately. For that, we will need a constitutional amendment to overturn *Citizens United* and restore sanity to our election system. With 22 states having passed resolutions calling for a constitutional amendment and the idea of an amendment now widely embraced in the Democratic Party, we've made tremendous gains. Still, there's a long way to go — and the new surge in corporate spending is a spur to intensify our efforts even more. We're ready for the challenge. ■

Photo courtesy of Pexels.

▶ **Good Trouble**, from page 1

threatening to deploy Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents to polling places to intimidate voters.

In mid-June, the FBI raided the office of the Ohio Organizing Collaborative, a grassroots organization that runs voter registration programs across the state. That same month, ICE agents accosted a poll worker in New York over social media posts criticizing the agency's conduct.

Congress has also considered legislation that would make it harder for millions of Americans to cast a ballot, while state legislatures continue advancing similar voter suppression bills. As a result, many voters will face new requirements this fall, including changes to vote-by-mail procedures and documentation rules.

"We're witnessing a Jim-Crow era effort from states across the country working to restrict our freedoms," said Christine Wood, co-director of the Declaration for American Democracy Coalition, which is housed at Public Citizen. "In the face of this rampant voter suppression, we must teach our community members on the ways they can make their voice heard, reach out to our neighbors to bring them into this movement, and preach to our loved ones about the moral necessity of carrying the torch of the Civil Rights Movement."

That call to action is the driving force behind Good Trouble Lives On, a nonviolent, nonpartisan weekend of action taking place July 17-19 in remembrance of Rep. John Lewis, the civil rights icon who urged Americans to get into "good trouble, necessary trouble" in defense of democracy and justice.

Last year, hundreds of thousands of people participated in more than 1,700 Good Trouble events nationwide. Public Citizen worked alongside organizations including Transformative Justice Coalition, Black Voters Matter, League of Women Voters, and many others to help coordinate organizing and communications efforts.

"Good Trouble Lives On" will focus on nonpartisan voter engagement, civic education, and faith-based organizing. Grassroots groups, legal advocates, faith leaders, and community members will come together to help people navigate new voting requirements, register eligible voters, and strengthen participation in communities that have historically faced barriers at the ballot box.

The weekend will begin on Friday, July 17, with teach-ins, nonpartisan voter education programs, radio broadcasts, candlelight vigils, and faith services.

Saturday, July 18, will focus on "Reach," with hundreds of nonpartisan voter registration kickoff events taking place nationwide. Participants will gather for community events before heading into neighborhoods to register voters and encourage civic participation.

The weekend concludes with "Preach," events, as congregations and faith communities hold worship services and civic education programs that connect faith with civic engagement. Faith leaders will encourage voter participation and organize voter registration efforts within their communities.

For organizers, the weekend is about more than honoring Lewis' legacy. It is about carrying forward the work he began.

"The fight started by John Lewis more than 60 years ago on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, still lives on like never before," said April Albright, national legal director of Black Voters Matter.

In 2026, America must once again reckon with its history and resist yet another attack on the rights of voters and an attempt to silence Black and Brown voices. Good Trouble lives on. ■

Global Trade Watch Tours the Industrial Midwest to Build a Bold, Progressive Trade Agenda

BY SARAH GRACE SPURGIN

Decades of free trade deals, written by and for the biggest corporations, killed good jobs and gutted working-class communities. President Donald Trump claimed he would fix these problems, but as always, he lied. Instead, his corrupt trade agenda has deepened economic uncertainty with sweeping and chaotic tariffs, exacerbated the affordability crisis, and enriched himself and his cronies. That's the message shared by Public Citizen and congressional and other allies at town hall meetings across the industrial Midwest.

But with Trump taking a sledgehammer to the global trading system, Public Citizen and our allies argued that there is an opportunity to demand something better. We must reject both the corporate-dominated deals of the past and Trump's authoritarian chaos and, instead, build a bold, progressive trade system that works for working people and fights corporate power.

This spring, Public Citizen, in partnership with the United Autoworkers, United Steelworkers, farmers' organizations, and small-business groups, has traveled across the Midwest on a "Building a Fair Economy for All" tour aimed at shaping that new agenda.

Energetic crowds have filled union halls in Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Wisconsin – states that have lost a combined 1.3 million manufactur-

see **Midwest Tour**, page 5 ▶

Public Citizen Global Trade Watch Director Melinda St. Louis, Rep. Chris Deluzio (PA-17), former U.S. Trade Representative Katherine Tai, and International VP of the United Steelworkers, Amber Miller (from left to right), at the Pittsburgh, Pa., stop of the "Building a Fair Economy for All" tour.

Slush Fund, from page 1

disclosing his tax returns in 2019, during Trump's first term.

In a typical lawsuit, the government is represented by DOJ attorneys led by the Attorney General. But because Trump appoints and can remove the Attorney General, it appeared impossible for the DOJ to defend the government's interests against Trump's claims. Public Citizen and other groups filed amicus briefs explaining the conflict to the court, and the court scheduled a hearing to consider how to address the specter of collusive litigation that Trump's lawsuit presented.

Rather than face the court, however, Trump and his DOJ "settled" his lawsuit, along with two administrative claims that Trump had filed seeking money from the government for the investigation into his ties with Russia, as well as the raid on his Mar-a-Lago residence relating to his wrongful possession of classified documents.

The settlement agreement called for the DOJ to create an "Anti-Weaponization Fund" to compensate individuals and entities that claim to have been targeted for "improper and unlawful political, personal, and/or ideological reasons."

On the day the settlement was signed, Attorney General Blanche established the fund and directed that $1.776 billion be transferred from the U.S. Treasury into the fund. Decisions on who is entitled to compensation from the fund were to be made by a five-member commission appointed by the Attorney General and removable by Trump. The fund had a sunset date of Dec. 15, 2028 — one month before the end of Trump's second term. The following day, the DOJ also issued a notice releasing Trump, his family, and his company from tax liability for his prior tax returns.

Neither the settlement agreement nor the Attorney General's actions excludes individuals who participated in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol from receiving money from the fund. In fact, when asked, Blanche refused to say that people convicted of assaulting police officers during the Jan. 6 insurrection would be ineligible for payments. And after pardoning or commuting the sentences of all the participants of the Jan. 6 attack, Trump said that they should be reimbursed.

Two officers who defended the Capitol on January 6 had a different view. Harry Dunn and Daniel Hodges filed a lawsuit in Washington, D.C., to challenge the fund, explaining that they continue to receive threats of violence because of their actions to protect the Capitol. Their lawsuit was quickly followed by others filed in Washington and Virginia.

Public Citizen Litigation Group filed suit in San Diego on behalf of podcaster and prominent social media personality Allison Gill. Gill is a former employee of the Veterans Administration who was fired by the first Trump administration for criticisms of the president she made on the Mueller, She Wrote podcast. Public Citizen's lawsuit on her behalf asks the court to set the fund aside because the DOJ and Blanche failed to follow proper procedures in establishing it.

In addition to lawsuits, the fund drew skepticism on Capitol Hill. Even many Republicans, usually willing to do the President's bidding, publicly balked at Trump's attempts to use a backroom settlement with his own Attorney General to give large payouts of taxpayer money to the Jan. 6 insurrectionists. Senator Thom Tillis of North Carolina called the scheme "stupid on stilts." Representative Mike Flood of Nebraska said that not "one penny of any fund should ever go to any January 6 insurrectionist that [sic] was in the Capitol."

Backlash over the fund was so fierce that it threatened to derail Trump's plea to Congress for billions more in funding for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. As a result, Blanche backtracked in congressional testimony, telling legislators that the DOJ was "not moving forward" with the fund. Blanche, however, refused to put that assurance in writing.

As this issue of *Public Citizen News* was going to print, the DOJ has cited Blanche's congressional testimony to assure two federal courts that the agency will not move forward with the fund. Blanche and the DOJ, however, have not yet put their reversal in any official agency document. As a result, although public pressure forced Trump to retreat from his taxpayer-funded "Anti-Weaponization Fund" for now, it remains unclear whether the administration will resurrect its plans after public attention dies down. ■

Midwest Tour, from page 4

"Every member of Congress who opposes Trump's authoritarian power grab should cosponsor Rep. DeLauro's resolution to show American workers that they have a real plan for trade that uplifts workers, protects the environment, and fights corporate power."

— Public Citizen Global Trade Watch Director Melinda St. Louis

ing jobs since NAFTA took effect in 1994. Together, participants have discussed how shifts in the global economy are impacting their communities, imagined alternatives to the status quo, and mapped out strategies to turn those ideas into reality.

The tour has brought together some of the country's leading progressive voices on trade, including former U.S. Trade Representative Katherine Tai, former Department of Labor economist Thea Lee, and members of Congress, including Reps. Marcy Kaptur (OH-09), Debbie Dingell (MI-06), Rashida Tlaib (MI-12), Chris Deluzio (PA-17), Chuy García (IL-4), Jonathan Jackson (IL-1), Delia C. Ramirez (IL-3), and Mark Pocan (WI-02). Local and national media, including an investigative reporter from the *Guardian*, have also joined the conversation.

Along the way, we've heard ambitious ideas from union activists, farmers, and parents struggling to put food on the table.

Ohio State Rep. Desiree Tims told attendees in Dayton that "the future of our economy should not simply be measured by corporate profits, but by whether working people and communities like ours are able to thrive."

In Detroit, Tlaib urged that "international trade and finance should be guided by the same values that we have here at home: sustainability, equity, democracy, and solidarity."

And in Allentown, UAW Local 677 President Mike Shupp called for closing loopholes in past and current trade agreements that allow corporations to offshore jobs while continuing to benefit from access to the U.S. market.

Those ideas — and many more — are making their way back to Washington. Interest in the tour continues to grow, with additional members of Congress expressing interest in hosting similar town halls in their districts. We're already working to put new events on the calendar.

Some of the solutions emerging from these conversations are reflected in a House resolution introduced by Rep. Rosa DeLauro last month. The Fair Trade for Working Families resolution outlines 10 key principles for a new trade model that benefits working people and remedies the economic and national security risks posed by the current system.

These principles include stronger labor, environmental, and wage standards; policies that support domestic job creation; measures to keep medicines safe and affordable; and safeguards against AI-driven job loss. "Every member of Congress who opposes Trump's authoritarian power grab should cosponsor Rep. DeLauro's resolution to show American workers that they have a real plan for trade that uplifts workers, protects the environment, and fights corporate power — and we're working to make that happen," said Public Citizen Global Trade Watch Director Melinda St. Louis.

It's no coincidence that many of the states hardest hit by corporate trade-related job losses proved especially susceptible to Trump's false promise that his trade policy would protect workers. The rise of authoritarian strongmen like Trump is, in part, a symptom of a much larger crisis: decades of economic inequality that have left millions desperate for some kind of answer to their pain.

Without an ambitious, progressive trade agenda, working people will continue to bear the costs of a broken system.

The enthusiastic response to our town hall tour shows just how eager people are for a serious conversation about building a fair economy for all. We're just getting started. ■

Uprooting the Forest Service

BY LOIS PARSHLEY

Fire season has barely begun, and more than 2.5 million acres have already burned across the United States — more than twice the 10-year average for this point in the year. That's likely to get worse: The National Interagency Fire Center's spring 2026 forecast projected very high fire risk across much of the West and Southeast. In the meantime, the Trump administration is moving to dismantle the agency most responsible for fighting wildfires and studying the conditions that make them more severe.

On March 31, 2026, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced the most sweeping reorganization in the 121-year history of the U.S. Forest Service. The plan would move the agency's headquarters from Washington to Salt Lake City, close 57 of its 77 research facilities across 31 states, shutter nine regional offices, and consolidate research management in Fort Collins, Colo. The changes are expected to affect roughly 5,000 employees.

Shepherding this transition is Tom Schultz, the only Forest Service Chief without prior experience inside the agency. Before his appointment, he was vice president of resources and government affairs for Idaho Forest Group, one of the country's largest lumber producers. When Schultz was named Chief, the industry lobbying group Federal Forest Resource Coalition praised the selection, saying, "They could not have picked a better person." Within months of taking office, Schultz signed an agreement with Idaho Gov. Brad Little to double federal timber sales from the state's national forests, a move that directly benefits his former employer.

His boss, USDA Undersecretary Michael Boren, also has a track record of disdain for the agency he now oversees. Boren, a billionaire Idaho rancher and fintech co-founder with no public lands management background, previously faced a restraining order after allegedly flying a helicopter at low altitude over a Forest Service trail crew. He has also been accused of building a private airstrip on national recreation land and an unauthorized cabin on national forest land. USDA Secretary Brooke Rollins has been explicit about the reorganization's purpose, saying it would increase timber production.

Zeroing Out the Science

The Trump administration moved forward without consulting Congress about what research needed to be done before slashing the Forest Service's programs. When asked about basic updates such as a new organizational chart, Schultz admitted that the agency was "still working through some of the details."

Many of the targeted facilities conduct long-term scientific research. Climate science depends on decades of continuous data collection to distinguish a climate signal from natural variability.

Facilities slated for closure include a disproportionate number of stations conducting long-term ecological monitoring, climate impact research, and watershed science. Among them is the Pacific Northwest Research Station, which has led key studies on climate change and wildfire patterns, and a Minnesota laboratory conducting globally significant peatland research. No Forest Service research facilities would remain in Alaska, where the agency oversees 22 million acres.

Three days after announcing the reorganization, Trump's 2027 budget proposal went even further. It proposed cutting the Forest Service's entire $309 million research budget. Critics say this would eliminate as many as 1,200 scientists, though Schultz disputed this estimate at a House hearing. The budget also proposed slashing State and Volunteer Fire Assistance programs by 97% and moved wildfire suppression funding entirely out of USDA into a new agency within the U.S. Department of the Interior. Sen. Martin Heinrich called the proposal a "roadmap on how to dismantle the Forest Service."

Proceeding Without Legal Authority

The administration is pressing ahead even though the appropriations law passed in 2025 barred the use of funds to "eliminate programs or projects, relocate an office or employees, or reorganize offices, programs or activities" without prior approval from the Appropriations Committee. When Rep. Chellie Pingree raised the issue at a House hearing in May, Schultz said he intended to proceed regardless of congressional approval. The Forest Service employees' union has called on Congress to request a Government Accountability Office investigation into the reorganization and to refer potential Anti-Deficiency Act violations to oversight bodies.

In the meantime, the Forest Service has already lost nearly one-fifth of its workforce through Department of Government Efficiency cuts, buyouts, and early retirements. History suggests further losses may follow. When the first Trump administration relocated the Bureau of Land Management headquarters to Colorado, 87% of affected employees chose to leave rather than relocate. Meanwhile, federal contracts for fire-suppression activities have declined by more than $254 million since February 2024.

There is little reason to expect that the Forest Service will emerge from this reorganization unscathed. As the nation heads into what forecasters predict will be a dangerous wildfire season, the agency faces the challenge with fewer employees, less institutional knowledge, and a diminished scientific infrastructure.The question is no longer whether these decisions will have consequences. It is who will be left to absorb them when the flames arrive. ■

Photo of forest fire courtesy of Pexels.

The Price of Zero

BY EILEEN O'GRADY

> **"If corporations and billionaires paid their fair share, our nation could have more than enough revenue to reinvest in American communities and make life more affordable for everyone. It's time to finally put people over corporate profits."**
>
> **— Public Citizen Co-president Robert Weissman**

Corporations spend money on lobbying and campaign contributions for the same reason investors buy stocks: they expect a return.

For dozens of America's largest corporations, that bet paid off handsomely. Some not only eliminated their federal income tax bills in 2025, but actually received money back from the government. The result was a return on investment that would make Wall Street jealous.

A recent Public Citizen report, "The Current Price of Zero," found that 88 highly profitable corporations collectively spent more than $852 million on lobbying and campaign contributions during the last three election cycles while paying zero federal corporate income taxes in 2025.

The payoff was substantial: Compared to the amount of taxes they avoided in just 2025, their six years of political spending effectively generated a 3,000% return.

Much of that spending went toward lobbying. Between 2019 and 2024, the 88 corporate tax dodgers spent a combined $712 million lobbying the federal government and hired an average of 1,120 lobbyists each year. Nearly half lobbied on either the One Big Beautiful Bill Act of 2025 or the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 (TCJA)—bills that lowered corporate tax rate and expanded tax giveaways for big businesses.

The findings point to a self-reinforcing cycle. Corporate political spending helps shape tax policy, favorable tax policy generates larger profits, and those profits can then be used to finance even more political influence.

The benefits extended beyond avoiding taxes. Collectively, the companies received $4.7 billion in tax rebates, meaning many not only reduced their tax liability to zero, but also received direct financial benefits from the tax code.

CVS Health illustrates the scale of those rewards. The company spent approximately $23.5 million on lobbying and campaign contributions during the most recent election cycle. Yet after eliminating its federal income tax liability in 2025, CVS received a tax rebate of $255 million. At that spending rate, the rebate alone could fund roughly two decades of political activity.

The gains for corporations have left their employees in the cold. Public Citizen found that 25 of the 88 companies that paid no federal corporate income taxes in 2025 have collectively laid off at least 21,200 workers since the start of that year.

"Republicans said their tax policies would create new jobs, but instead they provided egregious giveaways to corporations," said Public Citizen Co-president Robert Weissman. "If corporations and billionaires paid their fair share, our nation could have more than enough revenue to reinvest in American communities and make life more affordable for everyone. It's time to finally put people over corporate profits." ■

▶ **Pay**, from page 1

> **"It is outrageous and completely unjust that immigrant detainees are paid $1 a day for their labor to pad the pockets of private contractors already earning record profits of hundreds of millions of dollars each year."**
>
> **— Public Citizen Co-president Lisa Gilbert**

ees at the facility began a hunger and labor strike. As word of the conditions at the detention center, and the measly $1 a day pay detainees were receiving for a full day's work reached the outside, protests erupted.

But Delaney Hall is not alone when it comes to paying immigrant detainees $1 a day for their labor. A May Public Citizen report, "Private Profiteers: How ICE Detention Center Contractors Exploit Immigrant Detainees with $1 Per Day Pay," documents the private detention center practice of paying inmates just a dollar a day for the work they do inside detention facilities. Although it is a federal crime to hire immigrants without work authorization, for-profit companies running America's immigration centers are permitted to put immigrant detainees to work for just $1 a day, based on a 1950s-era federal law.

"Delaney Hall helped to shine a light on this issue, but it is a national problem," said Lisa Gilbert, Public Citizen co-president. "It is outrageous and completely unjust that immigrant detainees are paid $1 a day for their labor to pad the pockets of private contractors already earning record profits of hundreds of millions of dollars each year."

An estimated 60,000 immigrant detainees are currently held in ICE detention centers, the vast majority run by for-profit companies. Tens of thousands of detainees participate in the government's so-called Voluntary Work Program (VWP) because it is their only available source of income while in detention, and they are often coerced into participating or threatened with retaliation if they refuse. Estimates vary, but approximately 50% of those detained for more than a few days typically end up working in ICE's Voluntary Work Program, according to a 2020 report from Georgetown University's Immigration Law Journal.

The private corporations managing the network of detention camps across the U.S. are profiting tremendously, with their earnings boosted by the dollar-a-day payment scheme. The GEO Group's profits jumped from $32 million in 2024, for instance, to more than $254 million in 2025, and its founder and executive chairman made $11.3 million in compensation last year alone. CoreCivic, the second-largest immigration detention center contractor in the country, had its profits rise from $68.9 million in 2024 to $116.5 million in 2025. The maintenance and upkeep work the detainees do are essential to running the detention facilities and without the detainee labor would have to be done by regularly paid employees, biting into the contractor profits.

In some instances, detainees have reportedly worked 14 hours a day for just $1 per day. In addition, in many cases detainees may only use their earned wages to purchase basic necessities at corporate-run commissaries with inflated prices where toothpaste can cost $11 for a 4 oz. tube, a can of tuna fish may cost more than $3, and a bar of soap nearly $2.50. At these rates, with such paltry pay, it may take a detainee more than two days of work to purchase a single bar of soap. In addition, many detainees have alleged in lawsuits that they were threatened with solitary confinement, denied medical care, or loss of other privileges if they refused to work.

Legal actions move slowly, but there are currently seven federal court cases challenging the $1-a-day pay in five states, including Washington, California, Colorado, Georgia, and New York. In February 2026, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a unanimous decision rejecting the GEO Group's efforts to dismiss a class action lawsuit against it regarding the $1 a day pay issue at the Aurora Detention Facility in Colorado. This case will now proceed to a jury trial.

Last year, in January 2025, the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals, ruled that the GEO Group owes more than 10,000 current and former immigrant detainees who were housed at the Northwest ICE Processing Center in Tacoma, Washington, $17.3 million in back wages and $5.9 million to Washington state for "unjust enrichment" because they failed to pay the immigrant workers' Washington state's minimum wage, currently $17.13 per hour. In January 2026, the GEO Group appealed the case to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Regardless of the outcome of any of these lawsuits, they will not remedy the absence of integrity in these for-profit companies, which exploit practically free labor to maximize their profits. ■

Big Oil Is Ruining Summer

BY AARON REGUNBERG

A version of this article appeared online at The New Republic *in June.*

Growing up, summer meant family vacations, beach days, and block parties. But for millions of Americans today, excitement for the season has given way to anxiety over the weather events — extreme heat, hurricanes, drought, and wildfires — that have increasingly defined our summers.

These weather extremes are not natural. They are climate disasters. As a recent Public Citizen report outlines, they are exactly the kinds of catastrophes that Big Oil companies predicted their fossil fuel products would cause. At the same time, those companies orchestrated fraudulent campaigns of climate denial to block solutions that would have alleviated these harms.

To put it bluntly, Big Oil is ruining summer.

The last three summers have been the hottest ever recorded. Nationally, scientists have found that the climate crisis lengthened the average U.S. heat-wave season from 23 days to 70 days over the past 60 years. Researchers can now determine the degree to which the emissions of particular oil and gas companies have contributed to particular heat waves. For example, a study published last fall found that emissions from each of the biggest fossil fuel companies — ExxonMobil, Chevron, ConocoPhillips, Shell, and BP — made a number of lethal heat waves at least 10,000 times more likely.

These companies knew full well what they were doing. For decades, Big Oil companies internally forecasted exactly how their fossil fuel products would drive rising temperatures. In 1996, for example, Exxon scientist DJ Devlin gave a presentation to the Global Climate Coalition, a group of fossil fuel companies that colluded to spread climate denial. Reviewing the science connecting climate change with "suffering and death due to thermal extremes," Devlin noted that the "elderly, sick, and very young" would be particularly vulnerable, and explained that temperatures can cross a threshold "beyond which mortality rises significantly."

It's not just heat that will be supercharged this summer. Climate change is also intensifying droughts and wildfires, turning summer in many areas into a season of water rationing, smoke-filled skies, or worse.

The U.S. already experienced its most intense spring drought on record this year, with the first three months of 2026 ranking as the driest ever. Ninety-nine percent of the Southeast is in drought, with more than 60% experiencing severe to exceptional conditions. This has spurred record-breaking wildfires across the region — Georgia has already seen eight times as many burned acres so far this year compared to the pace of the last five years.

Nearly 90% of Nebraska is also in drought, and more than a million acres have burned in spring wildfires across the region. In the West, prolonged drought has strained water supplies to the point that Utah recently declared a state of emergency over its water crisis.

These droughts, and their impacts on wildfires, are directly related to climate change. A 2023 study found that almost 40% of the area burned by wildfires in the western United States over the last several decades can be attributed to emissions from the world's largest fossil fuel companies. The study's author described the connection between climate-driven drying and wildfire growth as one of the strongest correlations he had ever found in his data.

Again, the industry saw the danger coming. In 1982, the American Petroleum Institute commissioned a report warning that climate change would have "serious consequences for man's comfort and survival since patterns of aridity and rainfall can change." And in 1998, Shell predicted internally that unchecked fossil fuel use would bring "more droughts," "disrupt eco-systems," alter agricultural patterns, and fuel conflict.

Summer storms are also becoming more destructive. Rising ocean temperatures are making hurricanes more likely to intensify. Over the past four decades, storms near coastlines have intensified rapidly — roughly three times as often due to warmer oceans. Storms are also staying stronger farther inland than they did in the past and generating more rainfall.

Big Oil companies understood these risks as well. In 1989, Shell produced a confidential planning document predicting that continued fossil fuel use would lead to "more violent weather," including "more storms" and "more deluges." Tellingly, these companies demonstrated their belief in climate science by modifying their own infrastructure, often at significant expense, to prepare for the coming reality of worsening storms.

Even as these firms were taking action to protect their own assets, they worked to undermine public understanding of the crisis. One fossil fuel coalition strategy document called for efforts to "reposition global warming as theory (not fact)." In the words of former Sen. Chuck Hagel, who championed anti-climate legislation when he was in Congress: "They lied ... It would have put the United States and the world on a whole different track, and today we would have been so much further ahead than we are. It's cost this country, and it cost the world."

One of those costs is the carefree summers of our past. Big Oil stole them from us. So over the next few months, if you find yourself baking under the sun of a record-breaking heat wave, or stuck inside because the air outdoors is dangerously smoky, keep in mind that this didn't just happen. Our summers haven't simply gotten worse. They have been made worse by specific companies that knew that what they were doing would ruin summer and went ahead and did it anyway. We shouldn't let them get away with it. ■

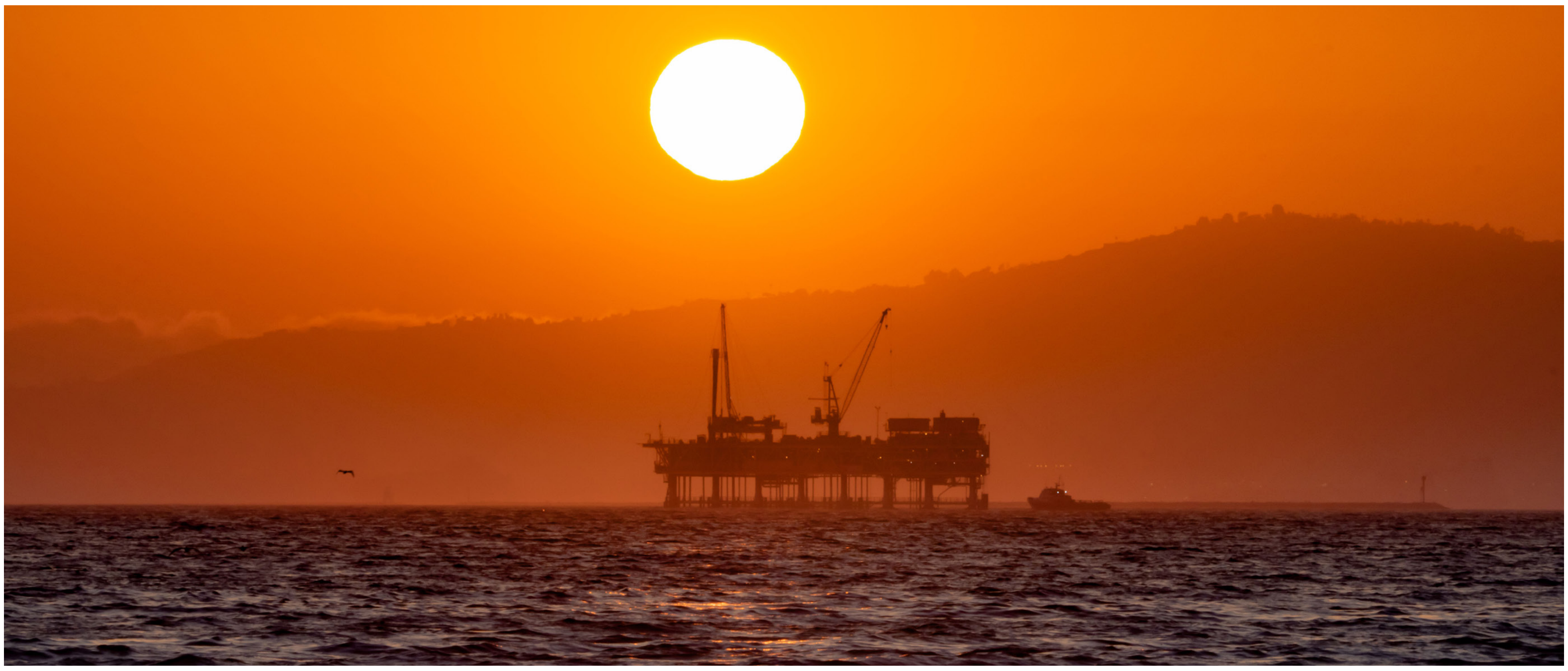


Photo of a silhouetted oil platform in Huntington Beach, Calif., courtesy of Pexels.

The Big Ugly Threat to Safety Net Hospitals

BY EILEEN O'GRADY

What happens when a hospital disappears? For millions of Americans, that question is no longer hypothetical. A new Public Citizen report warns that sweeping Medicaid cuts passed last year are putting hundreds of hospitals — and the communities that depend on them — at risk.

The Republican-backed One Big Beautiful Bill Act, dubbed the "Big Ugly Law" by opponents, is projected by the Congressional Budget Office to cut around $1 trillion from Medicaid over the next decade. Draconian work and eligibility requirements are expected to push 16 million people off health care coverage by 2034.

A new Public Citizen report, which was covered nationally, internationally, and in state and local outlets across the country, finds that the fallout won't stop with patients. After reviewing financial records from thousands of hospitals across the country, researchers identified 446 hospitals at heightened risk of closing or cutting services as Medicaid funding shrinks. Together, these hospitals serve roughly 7 million patients and employ 250,000 direct care workers.

These facilities disproportionately serve low-income communities, including many with larger shares of Black and Latino residents and high reliance on Medicaid.

"The Medicaid cuts severely deepen a national health care crisis, stretching from cities to small towns to rural communities," said Robert Weissman, co-president of Public Citizen, "and impacting those least equipped to maneuver around hospital shutdowns."

The at-risk hospitals can be found across the country. Some states will be hit harder: Connecticut, California, New York, Massachusetts, and Washington each have more than a quarter of their hospitals at risk. But the rest of the country isn't that much better off, with Washington, D.C., and 44 states all facing the prospect of at least one hospital closing or slashing services.

While most of the affected hospitals serve urban areas, nearly 40% are rural, where closures can be especially destabilizing. About half carry special federal designations reflecting how essential they are to the communities they serve, including 19% classified as "Critical Access Hospitals" — small facilities located more than 35 miles from another hospital.

When hospitals scale back or shut down, emergency rooms become overcrowded, wait times increase, and doctors are stretched thinner. It's well-documented that overburdened clinicians have less time per patient, which can compromise quality of care. In rural areas, patients may be forced to travel hours for services that were once nearby, or they may forego them altogether.

"Rather than enact policies that protect people's access to safe, quality health care, Republicans opted to slash a critical lifeline to finance a massive tax giveaway for billionaires," said Susan Harley, managing director of Public Citizen's Congress Watch division.

Their own constituents will pay the price: nearly 200 of the at-risk hospitals are located in congressional districts represented by Republicans who voted for the Medicaid cuts, and 146 are in states with Republican senators.

In recent months, hospitals have announced layoffs and reduced services like obstetrics and maternal care, citing financial strain tied to Medicaid cuts. Centra Southside Community Hospital in Farmville, Va., closed its labor and delivery unit, along with related surgical and outpatient services in December, pointing to "recently enacted reductions in federal health care funding."

When Greene County General Hospital in Linton, Ind., ended obstetrics care in January, hospital leadership wrote: "This was a heartbreaking decision for our community. No hospital wants to cut services, but when reimbursement fails to cover even basic operating costs, we are left with no choice."

For the hospitals at risk and the countless communities they serve, the stakes couldn't be any higher. It is imperative that we undo the Big Ugly Law's horrific cuts. Protecting Medicaid means preserving the health and stability of entire communities and making life affordable. ■

San Antonio Residents Challenge a Growing Data Center Footprint

BY ADRIAN SHELLEY

What could bring 150 San Antonians together on the night of a Spurs playoff game?

A data center.

As readers of *Public Citizen News* will know, community opposition to data centers has spread rapidly across the United States. Virginia is home to the most data centers, while Texas leads the nation in proposed projects.

Many residents do not want to live near data centers because they are noisy, ugly, and energy-intensive. They create relatively few jobs, yet often receive tax breaks and other incentives from local governments.

There is also growing unease about the rapid expansion of AI and the infrastructure supporting it. For many communities, the data center has become the most visible symbol of Big Tech's growing presence.

Public Citizen's Texas office has a long history of partnering with communities to oppose new unwanted facilities. Coal-fired power plants, concrete batch plants, and metal recyclers have all faced local opposition. Data centers share one important characteristic with these facilities: they can contribute to air pollution.

That brought Public Citizen to a hotel on San Antonio's West Side one Thursday in May, where community members gathered for a hearing before the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ). They came to oppose a proposed data center by Vantage, a developer that operates dozens of data centers worldwide and is planning its second facility in San Antonio.

We expected a large turnout because we had spent weeks talking with residents who live near Vantage's facilities. Public Citizen's clean energy advocate in San Antonio, DeeDee Belmares, partnered with Southwest Workers Union to canvas neighborhoods surrounding the project. Residents described a familiar pattern: one day, a wooded lot stood nearby; the next, it had been cleared. Construction moved quickly, often with little public awareness. The facilities were loud, brightly lit through the night, and seemed to keep expanding.

The environmental concerns extend beyond the electricity required to power data centers. Because Texas's electric grid remains vulnerable to disruptions, operators rely on diesel backup generators to prevent outages. Those generators emit particulate matter, nitrogen oxides, greenhouse gases, and other pollutants. In San Antonio, which is designated a nonattainment area for ozone under the Clean Air Act, additional emissions can worsen air quality.

Larger facilities typically require major source permits under the Clean Air Act. These permits trigger stricter pollution controls, additional monitoring requirements, and more opportunities for public participation. But some facilities may be improperly avoiding those requirements.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recommends assuming backup generators will operate 500 hours per year when calculating emissions. In San Antonio, facilities emitting more than 25 tons of nitrogen oxides annually generally require a major source permit.

When Vantage first applied for an air permit for its facility, it reported that 33 generators would operate just 113 hours per year, far below the EPA's recommended assumption. TCEQ issued the permit the next day.

Had regulators examined the numbers more closely, they might have noticed that Vantage's calculations resulted in estimated emissions of 24.9 tons per year, just below the threshold that requires a major source permit.

The following year, Vantage returned with a revised proposal. The company said it needed 65 generators, double the original number. Yet it also claimed those generators would operate only 57.37 hours per year, exactly half the previous estimate. The result was the same: emissions remained below the permitting threshold. TCEQ approved the permit.

The hearing itself was lively. Some folks voiced frustration when company representatives declined to answer questions and when agency officials said broader concerns were "outside the scope of the permit." One woman held up a jar of discolored water labeled, "Is this our future?" Others waved signs and cheered

see **Data Center**, page 16 ▶

PUBLIC CITIZEN'S 2026 GALA

On June 2, supporters, advocates, and allies gathered at Washington's National Press Club to celebrate a shared commitment to accountability, democracy, and the public interest at Public Citizen's annual gala. The evening honored U.S. Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.) with the 2026 Golden Boot Award, recognizing decades of partnership in the fight against government corruption, dark money, and corporate abuse. A champion of campaign finance reform, government transparency, and the rule of law, Whitehouse has long stood alongside Public Citizen in advancing reforms that strengthen American democracy.

Accepting the award, Whitehouse praised the organization's unwavering advocacy: "Public Citizen recognizes the threat to our democracy from the captured right-wing Supreme Court, the deluge of corrupting dark-money influence, and the fossil fuel industry's climate denial fraud operation. The battle to expose the rampant corruption permeating the Trump administration is one for the ages, and I know I can count on Public Citizen to help lead that charge."

Photos courtesy of Keith Mellnick.

Public Citizen Co-president Lisa Gilbert.

Former Public Citizen President Joan Claybrook.

Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.) addresses gala attendees.

Lisa Gilbert addresses gala attendees.

Public Citizen Co-president Robert Weissman.

Joan Claybrook, Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse, Joy Howell, and Garland Williams (left to right).

Dr. Reshma Ramachandran, a member of the board of directors for Doctors for America.

Sen. Whitehouse accepts the 2026 Golden Boot Award.

Public Citizen Board Member Gerson Smoger introduces Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse.

The Swamp Monster (And His Lobbying Firm) Return

BY ALAN ZIBEL

In early June, former Interior Secretary David Bernhardt and his colleagues celebrated the first completed year of their lobbying firm at the Salt Line, an oyster bar and seafood restaurant by Nationals Park in the nation's capital.

The guest list, dutifully reported by *Politico*, was a who's who of former Interior Department officials from Trump's first term, lobbyists, and Republican elected officials who are all in the business of doing favors for corporate clients – and hoarding more wealth for themselves in the process.

The Bernhardt Group's festivities by the Potomac River coincided with research by Public Citizen and the watchdog organization Fieldnotes documenting the revolving-door lobbying by the firm and its clients.

The report, entitled "Return of the Corporate Swamp Monster," found that Bernhardt Group recorded $8.8 million in lobbying revenue from 53 clients in just three quarters of lobbying starting in mid-2025.

The report documented how the Bernhardt Group has established itself as a go-to boutique lobbying firm, easing access for oil and gas, mining, and agriculture interests to loot American public lands and put corporate interests ahead of public interest protections.

"We know how this administration moves – because we helped move it before," Bernhardt said in a press release issued upon his firm's launch.

The influence of Bernhardt's lobbying firm on Doug Burgum's Interior Department highlights a troubling dynamic that was present at the start of Trump's first term and has only worsened in his second. Several lobbying firms with direct ties to Trump have seen phenomenal growth in recent years as corporations seek routes to influence Trump, often through personal connections and displays of loyalty and partisanship.

At least 85% of Bernhardt Group's revenue to date comes from clients whose businesses are heavily tied to the Interior Department.

According to the report's analysis of first-quarter 2026 lobbying data from OpenSecrets, Bernhardt's firm earned:

- 34% ($3 million) from the mining industry;
- 23% ($2 million) from the oil and gas industry;
- 12% ($1 million) from government agencies that provide water for big Western agriculture users;
- 10% ($910,000) from agriculture and forestry companies and
- 5% ($430,000) from renewables or mixed fossil fuel/renewables businesses.

The report also dug into Interior Department visitor logs for 2025 and found 33 visits to the agency by Bernhardt Group staffers, including 15 involving identifiable clients or other lobbying firms.

"While Interior Secretary Doug Burgum is busy defending Trump's wars and assorted vanity projects in Washington, D.C., David Bernhardt and his colleagues have expanded their influence," said Public Citizen Co-president Robert Weissman. "Bernhardt's firm is essentially a for-hire shadow version of the Interior Department, stocked with former officials cashing in on their prior government employment by lobbying for corporate interests."

For Bernhardt Group clients, these sorts of connections are a key selling point. In a candid statement announcing Bernhardt Group's hiring, Andre Booyzen, managing director of American Tungsten & Antimony, an Australian company seeking to mine in Utah, said he is working for U.S. government support to ensure that his company "has a first mover advantage in terms of the U.S. antimony market."

Hiring the Bernhardt Group, Booyzen said, "will open new doors for us much faster, as we are able to lean on the knowledge and expertise the Group provides, particularly when liaising at a U.S. government level."

That's the kind of access and influence that only money can buy. ■

Public Citizen Recommends ...

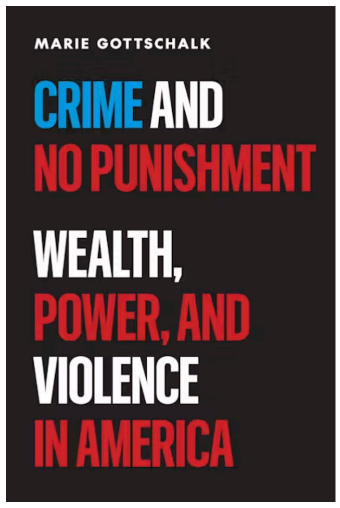
"Crime and No Punishment: Wealth, Power, and Violence in America"

By Marie Gottschalk; $39.95; Princeton University Press

Law enforcement's ongoing failure to fight corporate crime and violence – even as federal authorities ruthlessly pursue exaggerated crackdowns on street crime – is the subject of Marie Gottschalk's important and impressively researched new book, "Crime and No Punishment."

The 500-plus-page book is factually dense but written in an approachable style that will make it a key resource for anyone curious about how to implement reforms to hold the powerful accountable as well as readers seeking to better understand the chronically uneven and unjust approach to law enforcement in the U.S.

The first third of the book provides a detailed recent history of the federal government's violent and diffuse efforts to enforce laws locally through policing – all too often at the behest of the ownership class – and the emergence of the carceral state. Gottschalk ties the development of local policing in recent decades with military efforts to engage in forever wars since Vietnam, which also, essentially, amount to violent global policing efforts. The book makes clear the mutually reinforcing nature of U.S. engagement in global and local campaigns to reshape societies through violence.



These early chapters, which highlight the astounding expenses, elaborate punitive structures, and immense societal sacrifices that the hegemony of a "tough on crime" worldview is inflicting on American life, are insightful on their own. In context, they cast the subsequent sections on corporate crime in stark relief.

With some exceptions, the political power of corporations has served to minimize and marginalize enforcement against corporate lawbreakers over the past century. The exceptions mostly occur when corporate criminality has threatened business and the market economy generally, and seldom when corporate violence inflicts more direct suffering on workers, consumers, or the environment.

Gottschalk's meticulous history exposes the role of deregulation, especially under Presidents Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush, in allowing financial corporations to take on increasing levels of risk that fueled the subsequent financial crises. The detailed, critical history of the enforcement response following the Savings & Loan scandal of the 80s and early 90s provides insights into the government's often slow and uneven response. Nevertheless, President George H.W. Bush's vow to "throw the crooks in jail" and the strong collaboration between financial regulators and the U.S. Department of Justice in developing cases resulted in more than 1,000 felony convictions.

The federal enforcement response to the 2008 financial crisis, by contrast, featured only a single criminal prosecution. That response, it is clear, was not only anemic and insufficient, but plainly a consequence of neoliberal policies and a lack of political will to pursue corporate prosecutions under the Obama administration – even as the administration escalated George W. Bush-era enforcement policies against immigrants.

The third section covers the intersection of enforcement against corporations and individuals caught in the net of the opioid crisis, exposing the stark contrast between draconian policing and sentencing policies against drug users and street-level dealers with the kid-glove treatment of major pharmaceutical corporations whose reckless profit-maximization schemes fueled mass addiction.

Of particular value is the wide lens Gottschalk applies to relay these intersecting histories, demonstrating that our current, broken justice system – in both its over-enforcement against low-level offenders and its under-enforcement against corporations and elites – is the product of political choices. Choosing differently, by implication, is a matter of political will – a will that may well emerge in light of the rule of rampant impunity for corporate insiders the Trump administration has embraced.

– Rick Claypool ■

To order books, contact the publisher or visit your local bookstore or library.

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The Loudmouth's Lawyer: The Long Public-Interest Career of Paul Alan Levy

For nearly half a century, Paul Alan Levy built a career standing up for people who spoke too loudly for the liking of powerful institutions. Working as a lawyer at Public Citizen Litigation Group, Paul represented clients ranging from dissident union workers to anonymous bloggers, parody artists, Yelp reviewers, and consumers angry enough to build websites criticizing corporations. Over time, Levy became one of the country's most influential defenders of online free speech, helping shape the legal rules governing anonymous internet commentary, parody websites, and so-called "gripe sites."

Long before he was arguing cases in court or battling corporations accused of bullying critics into silence, Levy was a lanky teenager who organized anti-war vigils and fought school administrators over his right to express dissent.

"I grew up as a loudmouth," Levy said in a recent interview in June, the month he officially retired from Public Citizen. "And I identify with people who are under social pressure, as well as legal pressure, to shut up."

When officials barred him from wearing a black armband protesting the Vietnam War, Paul found a workaround: he wore a black necktie instead. His activism also made him a target for classmates who disagreed with him. And he recalls that, after unrest following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., someone hurled a brick through his family's window.

Those experiences shaped both his politics and his instincts as a lawyer. "I learned to stand up for myself," he once reflected. "I'm glad to help other people stand up for themselves."

Levy attended Reed College and later the University of Chicago Law School, initially seeing law as a path into political activism. But during a summer job at one of the country's earliest public-interest law firms, he discovered something more concrete: litigation could directly help people with little power protect themselves against institutions that had plenty of it.

After clerking for Judge Wade McCree Jr. and briefly working in the Solicitor General's office, Levy arrived at Public Citizen in 1977. He expected to stay only briefly before eventually starting his own public-interest practice elsewhere. Instead, he found a community that kept him there for decades.

"It turned out to be such a wonderful place to work with really smart people, really dedicated people," he said. "So here I am, 48 and a half years later."

For the first two decades of his career, Levy specialized in labor law and union democracy cases. He represented dissident union members fighting entrenched leadership and became deeply involved with reform movements inside organized labor, including Teamsters for a Democratic Union.

The internet was still young when Levy began taking on cases involving online criticism and free expression. Businesses and public figures were increasingly experimenting with novel legal tactics — trademark claims, defamation suits, copyright threats — to suppress critical websites and anonymous online commentary.

Levy became one of the first lawyers to systematically push back.

In one early case, a homeowner sued by Terminix after criticizing the company online challenged the emerging effort by corporations to weaponize trademark law to silence unhappy customers. Levy argued that the use of the company's name in "meta tags" to ensure that the homeowner's noncommercial criticism website appeared prominently in search results deserved constitutional protection. The company eventually abandoned the case.

More victories followed. Levy defended "gripe sites" and T-shirt parodists targeting figures like Wal-Mart and Jerry Falwell, argued for protections for anonymous online speakers, and fought efforts to use lawsuits to unmask critics or intimidate consumers into deleting negative reviews.

His legal work helped establish standards that many courts now use when deciding whether anonymous internet users can be identified through litigation. Colleagues in the field credit Levy with helping shift the legal landscape during the formative years of online speech law.

His strategy, he said, was to appeal to judges' "better instincts" about free expression, even when they might not sympathize with his clients personally. "I think I was pretty good at finding ways to get even conservative judges to understand the importance of the legal points I was making," he said.

Earlier in his career, Levy argued four cases before the Supreme Court. Remarkably, the court decided every one of those cases unanimously, although not always in his favor.

Over the years, Levy taught continuing legal education courses on online free speech litigation, and he became known for colorful one-liners and memorable courtroom framing.

A 2014 profile by *Washingtonian*

see **Levy**, page 16 ▶

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IN THE SPOTLIGHT

The following are highlights from our recent media coverage.

Robert Weissman, co-president of Public Citizen

On the Trump family's continued business activity: *The New York Times, Atlanta Black Star.* **On Trump's branding of America's 250th anniversary as a Christian celebration:** *Mother Jones, USA TODAY.* **On how Trump's IRS settlement could block tax audits of him, his family, and their businesses:** *BBC News.* **On how AI has lowered the barrier to creating nonconsensual intimate imagery:** *Decrypt.* **On Trump's $1.8 billion slush fund:** *The Independent, Common Dreams.*

Lisa Gilbert, co-president of Public Citizen

On how Trump's IRS settlement could block tax audits of him, his family, and their businesses: *BBC News.* **On Trump's $1.8 billion slush fund:** *CNN.* **On lawmakers leaning on lobbyists for cash as they leave Congress:** *Bloomberg Government.* **On Trump's UFC fight at the White House:** *NBC News.* **On Trump dropping his $1.8 billion slush fund after outrage over paying his allies:** *The Independent, Common Dreams.* **On the release of Trump's ballroom funding agreement:** *The Daily Beast.* **On the commingling of 250th anniversary events, Trump's UFC fight, and a $1 million per-plate fundraiser on Trump's own birthday:** *The Hill, Common Dreams.* **On U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) weakening detention rules:** *Nation of Change.*

Public Citizen Litigation Group

On Trump's plan for a massive arch in Washington, D.C.: *The Washington Post, Associated Press, HuffPost, The Independent, Spectrum Local News, DC News Now.* **On thousands of immigrant truckers losing their commercial licenses as part of a Trump administration crackdown:** *PBS.* **On mail ballot rules:** *Bloomberg Law.* **On Trump's $1.8 billion slush fund:** *Mother Jones.*

Tyson Slocum, director of Public Citizen's Energy Program

On data center conflicts: *The New York Times, Common Dreams.* **America's energy affordability crisis:** *Reuters, The Washington Examiner.* **On the retirement of outdated coal plants:** *Mother Jones, Canary Media.* **On a federal gas tax holiday:** *Wired.* **On utility chiefs poised for windfall as grid spending surges:** *Las Vegas Herald.*

Dr. Robert Steinbrook, director of Public Citizen's Health Research Group

On HHS Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s plan to obtain medical records for millions of Americans: *Inside Health Policy.* **On the need for the next FDA commissioner to insulate career FDA staff from political pressure:** *Democracy Now!, MedPageToday.* **On the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention blocking a Covid-19 vaccine study from being published in the agency's scientific journal:** *Common Dreams.*

Adrian Shelley, director of Public Citizen's Texas Office

On San Antonio residents pushing back against a West Side data center: *San Antonio Current.* **On water and energy demands tied to data centers:** *KVUE, KXAN.*

Craig Holman, government affairs lobbyist with Public Citizen's Congress Watch division

On Sen. Michael Bennet (D-CO)'s disclosure of a $950,000 loan to his campaign for governor of Colorado: *The American Prospect.* **On some of Elon Musk's earliest Department of Government Efficiency recruits getting into the business of war:** *Vanity Fair.* **On Donald Trump's stock investments:** *Notus.*

J.B. Branch, Big Tech accountability advocate

On Trump's executive order on AI: *USA TODAY, MarketWatch, Decrypt, MS NOW.* **Great American Artificial Intelligence Act of 2026:** *The Center Square, The Washington Examiner, Sludge.* **On AI cyber vulnerabilities:** *Inside Cyber Security.*

Rick Claypool, research director for Public Citizen

On the crypto sector's corporate-friendly policies: *CNBC.* **On crypto spending in the 2024 election cycle:** *Mother Jones.* **On voters being against corporate money influencing politics:** *Cointelegraph.* **On Big Tech corporations' pursuit of profit:** *Connecticut Mirror.*

▶ **Levy**, from page 14

dubbed him "the web bully's worst enemy," a title Levy found amusing but imprecise. "It's not web bullies," he said. "It's people who attempt to bully others out of speaking on the web."

Even in retirement, Levy does not sound particularly retired. He plans to continue consulting with consumers and lawyers facing litigation, blogging, and staying active in local community organizations in Washington. He also plans to spend more time at a family lake house in New Hampshire. Another hope is to take up an old hobby: playing piano, which he studied as a teenager.

Looking back, Levy hopes younger lawyers take away one central lesson from his career: "You can make a career out of being a public-interest lawyer. There's tremendous value in staying, learning, and continuing to fight." ■

▶ **Data Center**, from page 9

in support of commenters.

Public Citizen raised concerns about suspicious numbers in the permits. The EPA has a term for permits that are artificially structured to avoid regulatory requirements rather than reflect a facility's full potential emissions: "sham permits."

Some residents felt the process itself resembled a sham. Community members packed the hearing room while agency officials and company representatives listened. Across a busy street, the data center at the center of the dispute was already built and operating.

The hearing may be over but the fight is not. Communities across Texas are taking a closer look at the rapid expansion of data centers and asking whether the rules are being followed. ■

Adrian Shelley, Public Citizen's Texas office director, above, speaks to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality about how Texans don't want the air pollution and other potential harms that can come when a data center sets up shop in our communities. The public hearing in May 2026 was for one of two data centers planned for San Antonio by a corporation called Vantage. Photo courtesy of DeeDee Belmares.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE...

Public Citizen reports on how the Trump administration's downsizing of the federal workforce cost American taxpayers billions.

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75	7.0%	$700	6.2%	$620
80	8.1%	$810	6.9%	$690
85	9.1%	$910	8.1%	$810
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