

Breaking the Cycle: Addressing Instability and Building Better Institutions in an Anti–Institutionalist Moment

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04.06.2026

The economic instability pervading American life is being exploited by an authoritarian coalition. A pro-democracy agenda must reduce market dependence for life's essentials and rebuild state capacity.

Key Points

- There is an epidemic of economic and civic instability in the US created by longstanding institutional failure which generates anti-institutionalism.
- Authoritarian actors have been far more effective at exploiting anti-institutionalism than the pro-democracy coalition, with DOGE being the clearest example.
- Reducing market dependence for life's essentials and building new public institutions are both required for democratic construction.
- Expanding the affirmative capacity of the state whilst dismantling the coercive arms such as immigration enforcement is crucial.
- Pro-democracy actors who are investing in countervailing power through tenant unions, cooperatives, worker standard boards etc. can build a power capable of reconstruction.

Summary

American life is defined by an epidemic of economic and civic instability. Day-in and day-out, people's lives are riddled with problems, big and small — from essentials like housing being too expensive to the constant sense that our economic interactions are governed by algorithms designed to scam us. While these experiences seem to operate on different magnitudes, they all feed into an experience of unpredictability about what the next moment will bring and the sense of being taken in at every turn. This economic instability is in a collision course with democratic backsliding and the unpredictability and lack of material safety that breeds.

Deep instability that spans both people's economic and civic lives generates disenchantment with existing institutions and opens the door to anti-institutionalist perspectives. When the institutions that have promised economic mobility, safety and a dignified life fail time and time again, people turn against them.

The pervasive instability people are experiencing right now is not an accident. Rather, it has been deliberately embedded into our economy by those in power to further consolidate wealth and political control. Authoritarian leaders leverage instability — in the economic and democratic spheres — to consolidate their power. It is precisely when people feel disempowered and disenfranchised that the right can trade on these feelings by offering ever more authoritarian solutions.

If instability has been engineered into both our economy and our politics, then the response must be equally structural. Policy interventions cannot just focus on insulating the public from shocks emanating from the gravitational center of extreme wealth. We must change who holds power to begin with, who writes the rules, and which institutions shape everyday life.

Critically, the pro-democracy coalition must not be understood as dismissive of anti-institutionalist feelings wholesale, but rather recognizing its broad validity and addressing the underlying causes of elite failure and legitimate distrust in meaningful ways.

We need a two pronged approach to building the economy and democracy we deserve. First, we need to significantly scale back the degree to which we depend on market provision to deliver the necessary elements of a stable and dignified life. Second, we must build new state institutions which have the public interest woven into their design.

Introduction

Things are teetering on the edge across American life. Throughout the economy, there is an [overwhelming sense](#) that the life that one was promised is no longer accessible. The

price of the building blocks of a dignified life — housing, education, and healthcare — haven't [kept up](#) with inflation and wages. Day-in and day-out, people's lives are riddled with problems, big and small. A person may be struggling to put food on the table, facing an unexpected and expensive health emergency, and working an unpredictable schedule incompatible with childcare. This person may then face further indignities like being unable to cancel an overpriced subscription without hours on hold, staring down opaque, last minute fees when booking a flight, and facing grocery prices set by a black box surveillance apparatus. While these experiences seem to operate on different magnitudes, they all feed into an experience of unpredictability about what the next moment will bring and the sense of being taken in at every turn.

Even as confronting today's economy is a knife-edge dance most days, we are also experiencing significant [democratic backsliding](#). Masked paramilitary thugs — subsidized by a budget larger than most countries' militaries — are shooting people in broad daylight, seemingly with impunity. Journalists are being arrested for covering protests. Neighbors and colleagues are being put into detention centers or planes bound for a country they've never even been to. An ever widening segment of the American public — immigrants, homeless people, political opposition, journalists, parents — live under the constant threat of state violence being used against them. Congress has, at times willingly, abrogated its oversight and budgetary power, the Supreme Court has aggressively policed the Biden administration's modest progressive policymaking validating nearly every one of Trump's abuses.

Against this backdrop, a pervasive sense of instability has come to define much of American life, trapping people in a cycle of economic and democratic instability. The lack of basic democratic protections stymies economic vitality — one example which exemplifies this was during the high point of the violent immigration enforcement wave in Minneapolis. Immigrant families refrained from going to work and school, [dampening](#) economic prosperity. But the inverse is also true — [research](#) by political scientist Susan Stokes has found that inequality makes democratic backsliding more likely.

Deep instability that spans both people's economic and civic lives generates disenchantment with existing institutions and opens the door to anti-institutionalist perspectives. When the institutions that have promised economic mobility, safety and a dignified life fail time and time again, people turn against them. Institutions such as the public sector, the [social safety net](#), and labor unions — while never perfect — once presided over a social contract that valued labor enough to produce and sustain a broad middle class. It is perhaps no surprise then that these institutions have come under attack throughout the neoliberal era both by Democrats and Republicans. Of course, this social contract was rife with exceptions, including for Black and other communities deprived of equal investment and equal participation in both economic and democratic life. But as rates of economic mobility have slowed alongside the financialization of a once-productive economy, even the defining cultural idea that the next generation can and should grow more prosperous than their parents is fraying. The American Dream, always tinged with myth, is now something closer to fantasy.

Over the last half-century, all three branches of government have led the charge in rampant deregulation, the offshoring of once-stabilizing jobs, unpopular military adventures, and gross displays of corruption and incompetence at the highest levels — from Watergate to Hurricane Katrina. Americans have come to associate our public institutions with failure to deliver material benefits and a rigged system that only benefits the ultra-elite. It's unsurprising, then, that the interaction between ever-widening instability and growing anti-institutionalism has created an opening for political actors interested in consolidating power. For authoritarian actors, instability and anti-institutionalism create a void that can be **filled** with the promise of stability through the strong arm of an authoritarian leader. Such leaders **weaponize** the fact that institutions are broken, and the feeling of widespread instability, to validate their claims on absolute power. In short, longstanding and widespread instability has given rise to a generally anti-institutionalist fervor that has been co-opted by pro-authoritarian forces. Trump has come to power by recognizing the economic pain and political disenfranchisement of everyday Americans, explaining that pain through a full-throated critique of existing political, economic, and social orders against clear enemies, with bold broad policies and a sense of decisive collective action as their solution. As historian Gabriel Winant **describes**, "Although on the surface MAGA is nostalgic, Trump's movement has been immensely historically generative — creating new modes of political expression and opening new arenas of policymaking: mass deportation, anti-trans assaults, vaccine skepticism. This is why it is so destructive".

However, the collision of instability and growing anti-institutionalism also creates openings for progressive actors to build new forms of governance that **address** the underlying drivers of instability and jettison once and for all the structures and practices that have historically extracted from regular people. Taking bold steps to reconstruct government is imperative — not only to undo the autocratic bent that Trump has woven into our public institutions, but also because doing so has the potential to open the opportunity to build an economy and democracy that prioritizes shared prosperity, stability, and delivers a dignified life for all. In turn, this economic reform can renew democracy, making democratic institutions serve everyday people and their needs and desires for a better life. It is critical that a pro-democracy coalition sees the collision of instability and anti-institutionalism as an opportunity to build something better.

In this paper, we make the case that we need a two pronged approach to building the economy and democracy we deserve. First, we need to significantly scale back the degree to which we depend on market provision to deliver the necessary elements of a stable and dignified life. People should not be dependent on for-profit entities for essentials like food, housing, education, care, and information. There are a range of tools available to decrease the role of the market, depending on the issue at hand. It might look like the universal public provision of healthcare and higher education, or creating public options to generate competition in moribund markets. Anti-trust and other regulatory approaches can check the power of large corporations and more progressive taxation can rebalance power towards regular people. Trump has broken the seal on taking **golden**

shares in companies and progressives too should think creatively about how to use the power of the state to benefit the public interest.

Second, we argue that we must build new state institutions, from the ashes of this authoritarian period, which have the public interest woven into their design. In the short-term, that requires rebuilding the affirmative capacity of the government to provide services and ensure that everyone can live a safe and dignified life. It also means undoing the expansion of state institutions that have sharpened the government's ability to coerce, harm, and surveil. We see the second prong as distinct from the first because we believe that we should take anti-institutionalist feelings seriously, it is incumbent on us to build back trust in the power of government through honest reflection of where the state has failed to deliver for the public.

In this paper, we lay out the ways in which instability and anti-institutionalism are showing up in people's lives, creating a political opening that can be harnessed by both pro-authoritarian and pro-democracy actors. We then identify how instability and anti-institutionalism have been calcified into the very ways our democracy and economy are structured, and how this has advanced democratic decline. Finally, we propose a set of high-level policy interventions that help us course correct and build the democracy that we all deserve. Ultimately, we encourage pro-democracy actors to embrace the root causes of anti-institutionalism rather than ignoring or shunning them — and take on the challenge of building new, democratically accountable institutions to help restore our social contract.

An Epidemic of Instability and Rising Anti-Institutionalism

Every day Americans suffer an epidemic of instability. This instability shows up in people's economic lives as well as their civic lives, making people feel like they lack agency as consumers, workers, and participants in our democracy. This instability is experienced as a failure of the social contract that the myth of the American dream has long rested on — if you work hard and make the “right” choices, you will be able to live a stable, secure life. As instability has become widespread, people's faith in the institutions that they understood to backstop access to a good life has eroded. Such instability, especially when it has been as longstanding as we have experienced in the US, forces people to search for alternatives. In this section, we trace the pervasiveness of economic instability in the US, and how it has given rise to a general sentiment of anti-institutionalism.

To grasp where it has failed, it is crucial to comprehend the historic understanding of the social contract. Over the last half century, our economic and political order has been governed by neoliberalism. The neoliberal social contract prioritizes markets and specifically private finance as the best way of allocating resources — relying on privatization and deregulation to funnel wealth and power upwards. Embedded within this

social contract is the assumption that regular people will benefit from the concentration of wealth and power at the very top. The theory suggests that if one invests in hard work and education, not only might the markers of a stable middle class life, like homeownership, become available, but the deserving few might even jump into the echelons of the ultra-wealthy and powerful. Alongside this economic contract, democratic institutions theoretically ensure fair and competitive markets, protect regular people from exploitation, deliver accountability to bad actors, and offer the safety and security people need to invest in themselves and their communities.

But it is clear that this social contract did not work — at least not as it was promised to everyday people. Neoliberalism has redistributed wealth and power upwards, and facilitated the rise of an economic and political elite that determines outcomes across politics, the economy, and broader society in its favor. As reported in a 2025 [Oxfam report](#), “nearly all measures confirm US inequality increased dramatically in recent decades”. This rise in inequality has not been felt by everyday people as a trade-off worth making relative to their own material betterment through growth and general economic prosperity. Rather, this inequality has increased as wages have stagnated and everyday economic precarity has increased. As [Equitable Growth](#) described in a 2024 report, most people in the US in the past 20 years have experienced no wage growth, while the top ten percent of the income distribution alone has grown its income share through business income and asset appreciation. This is felt as real precarity as people are living paycheck to paycheck — the [Federal Reserve’s financial wellbeing survey](#) for 2024 found nearly 40 percent of American adults would be unable to cover a \$400 emergency expense. Inequality has not been felt equally — persistent racial and gender income wealth gaps have resulted in historically marginalized communities facing even stronger headwinds in their path to social mobility.

Meanwhile, the cost of life’s essentials such as housing, health, child, and elder care, and education have skyrocketed, eating away at household income as income stagnates, which ultimately has made people’s everyday life feel harder, more stressful, and their future more constrained in very concrete ways. The following statistics are illustrative:

- 2026 [KFF polling](#) found that nearly half of US adults say it is difficult to afford health care costs, and about one-third of adults are therefore delaying or forgoing needed healthcare. The poll also found that about “75 percent of uninsured adults under the age of 65 say they went without needed care because of the cost”.
- The [Economic Policy Institute](#) has found that child care is now more expensive than rent in 17 states and “child care for one infant is more expensive than public college tuition in 38 states and Washington DC” As a result, as [Equitable Growth](#) describes, people face hard choices such as finding lower-cost informal care arrangements, exiting the workforce, or forgoing or delaying having children.
- 31.3 percent of US households spent more than 30 percent of their incomes on housing in 2024, which constitutes a severe cost burden, according to the [Census Bureau’s American Community Survey](#). Nearly half of renters were cost-burdened. Meanwhile, a recent [Gallup](#) poll found that only 45 percent of non-retirees expect to have the resources to live their later years in dignity.

Together, this paints a picture of a society where even the bare minimum of a dignified life is a stretch. But, the promise of neoliberalism has not just failed the bottom 90 percent in these fundamental ways. The wealth and power that has flowed to the very top has been used to turn everyday people into vehicles for wealth extraction, creating an exploitative society where people's agency is degraded day-in and day-out.

Broad swathes of workers are no longer afforded basic protections on the job — stable schedules, protection from wage theft, humane temperatures, or the ability to switch jobs. The growth of the gig economy, which built on earlier efforts to rob and restrict workers of employment protections, has given way to modern day serfhood where regular people toil away, only to be subject to the whims of their tech overlords without the modest affordances and legal protections of traditional employment. These embedded power dynamics are reinforced by decades of attacks on the ability to unionize and other attacks on workers' agency, like misclassification.

Even as the essentials of a good life stretch further and further out of reach, day-to-day living has increasingly felt like being scammed by big corporations at every turn. Junk fees are everywhere — the needless or deceptive charges often only disclosed at the final stage of purchase. Booking a flight or buying concert tickets becomes a guessing game as to cost, with random “resort fees” or things like seat selection or bringing a small bag onto the plane costing extra. Grubhub, the food delivery service, recently started an ad campaign that highlights their [rollback](#) of fees — notwithstanding that they never had to impose those fees in the first place. Meanwhile, corporate giants regularly [brag](#) about their ability to squeeze more profits out of people on their earnings calls, people who are struggling to make ends meet. These economic indignities, big and small, stack up to a rigged system to keep you on your toes no matter where you turn — as a worker or a consumer.

But people are not just facing instability in their economic lives. The basic terms of democratic power — where people can exert their influence in elections, and experience safety in their communities — have been violated continuously, most recently with the Supreme Court's evisceration of the Voting Rights Act. *Citizens United* supercharged an already oligarchic campaign finance system and opened the floodgates for corporate and special interest money into elections, allowing the wealthy and powerful outsized influence over our politics. Our economy has long been a transactional political system, motivated by dollars rather than people's needs, and this has only been amplified with the rampant and unapologetic corruption of the Trump administration. We need accountability and a fundamental reset in our democracy to put power back in the hands of the people who feel its effects the most.

The lifeblood of an accountable democracy, the public's ability to access high-quality, timely information, has been stymied as well. As our public life increasingly skews digital, a handful of centibillionaires exert dangerous levels of control over the flow of information through platforms and algorithms engineered for addiction rather than information. Large media conglomerates seek to grow even larger, destroying competition, viewpoint

diversity, and localism — once guiding principles of media policy. Big technology companies have converted the advertising revenue that sustained local journalism into a vast surveillance operation designed to extract every detail of our lives for profit.. Alongside this surveillance apparatus, an over-dependence on advertising revenue, private equity takeovers, and mass layoffs and closures has decimated local journalism. At the same time, the US public media system has been decimated, defunded, and maligned with rural communities bearing the brunt of public media austerity. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that faith in the media to report the news “fully, accurately, and fairly” dipped to the [lowest levels on record](#) following the closure of the corporation for public broadcasting last year.

In people’s civic life, ICE is creating unpredictability and terror among large swathes of society, preventing people from investing in their communities and living in terror that militarized immigration enforcement will snatch them or their loved ones off the streets. As the tragic shootings of Renee Good and Alex Pretti demonstrate, state violence has now broadened out to anyone who opposes the current political stance of those in power. This aggressive immigration enforcement comes on the heels of decades of militarized policing, surveillance, and detention that has been borne disproportionately by Black and brown communities.

The result of these attacks on both economic and civic stability is that regular people don’t have agency or predictability across a range of identities and civic functions that are critical for a functioning democracy and economy. People do not feel that existing supposedly democratic institutions and politics are responsive to their political will and thus able to transform their lives for the better. [Pew](#) chronicles a stark level of distrust by everyday people at significant social and political institutions from the federal government, mainstream news media, and scientists to act in the public interest.

Instability Serves a Purpose

The pervasive instability people are experiencing right now is not an accident. Rather, it has been deliberately embedded into our economy by those in power to further consolidate wealth and political control. In this section, we explore how deliberate instability has allowed for the consolidation of wealth and power amongst political and economic elites at the expense of everyday people.

For those with wealth and power, the endemic instability that everyday people experience has always been a feature, not a bug, of neoliberalism. Consider the labor market experience of Starbucks workers, many of whom went on strike in late 2025. These workers are demanding more hours because their hours often fall just below the 20 hour/week requirement for benefits qualification and higher wages. Other workers in the fast-food industry are [bound](#) by non-competes, which prohibits them changing jobs, and many face sexual harassment and other threats to their physical safety. While the FTC

issued a 2024 rule that [banned non-competes](#), this rule has been challenged in the courts and was struck down by a Texas court in late 2024. While the FTC has challenged the decision, the Trump administration has [effectively abandoned](#) the legal fight in favor of the ban. In short, workers in low-wage service jobs are forced to trade a stable schedule, a safe workplace, and higher wages in order to make ends meet in a system where their income barely covers basic needs like food and shelter. Meanwhile, the CEO at Starbucks was [awarded](#) a \$94 million dollar pay package after only four months on the job.

The experience of Starbucks workers is emblematic of how the ultra-wealthy consolidate wealth through manufactured precarity and a false sense of scarcity. Megacorporations like Starbucks can afford to give their workers more hours, stable schedules, and higher pay, and would likely still rake in massive profits. But the precarity itself serves the purpose of sustaining a dependent underclass of structurally docile workers who help pad the pockets of corporations and their executives.

Concentrated economic power built on the precarity of everyday people also facilitates the concentration of political power. Take the OBBBA, which was the largest transfer of wealth from the poor to the wealthy in history funded by cutting healthcare and food stamps — essentially handing a slush fund to Immigrations and Customs Enforcement and the Department of Homeland Security for militarized immigration enforcement and detention. This bill is a massive windfall for the ultra-wealthy and large corporations — actors who have historically used their wealth for political influence. The Center for American Progress [finds](#) that “the BBB delivers \$1 trillion in tax cuts to the top one percent while cutting more than \$1.1 trillion from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, and other health programs used by the poorest Americans”. Indeed, we see many of the most powerful companies in the country [donating](#) millions of dollars to President Trump’s pet project of renovating the White House including adding a ballroom. Many of these donors, such as defense contractor Lockheed Martin and technology company Palantir, have lucrative government contracts on the line. Other donors, especially crypto billionaires, face active government lawsuits.

Authoritarian leaders leverage instability — in the economic and democratic spheres — to consolidate their power. It is precisely when people feel disempowered and disenfranchised that the right can trade on these feelings by offering ever more authoritarian solutions. It goes without saying that the ICE occupation of Minneapolis is a direct authoritarian response to the long-running currents of anti-immigrant sentiment and white supremacy advanced and normalized by the far-right.

However, using authoritarian solutions as a purported response to longstanding instability can also happen on unlikely battlefields. Though it now feels like a distant memory, the DOGE project led by Elon Musk to eviscerate government function was purporting to save taxpayers money, streamline a bloated bureaucracy, and reduce government debt. DOGE advocates framed the project as responsive to the needs of a public who were not receiving what they deserved from the government. DOGE is a clear example of how instability interacts with rising anti-institutionalism and the role that such a collision can

play in advancing authoritarian policies. It is precisely because so many felt failed by the existing social safety net and pathways to social mobility that people were willing to countenance DOGE's project to pull back parts of the federal bureaucracy to the studs in the name of efficiency.

What is clear in hindsight is that not only did DOGE weaken the state's ability to conduct essential services like collect tax revenue, it also served as a key vehicle for concentrating executive power. As a part of the DOGE efforts, independent agencies like the Consumer Finance Protection Bureau (CFPB) were brought under direct control of Russell Vought, the mastermind behind the unitary executive theory. When viewed in light of the Trump administration's rampant corruption and deep ties to the private sector, it becomes clear that the point of gutting the CFPB was to bring it into political alignment with the current occupant of the White House.

The dynamics of the 2024 election demonstrated clearly that the right has been very effective at giving political expression to anxiety and insecurity. These tactics have gotten more extreme and violent since the Trump administration took office, and it is not clear whether such political and economic consolidation will pay political dividends over the long-term. Today's political moment is supercharged, but it is not new. Leaders from both parties have leveraged economic and democratic instability to consolidate their own wealth and political power for decades. But we can make different choices requiring pro-democracy actors to restore trust and faith that democratic systems can deliver. When people experience security and predictability, they can move through the world with agency, ultimately strengthening the fabric of both our economy and our democracy.

A Framework for the Path Forward

If instability has been engineered into both our economy and our politics, then the response must be equally structural. Policy interventions cannot just focus on insulating the public from shocks emanating from the gravitational center of extreme wealth. We must change who holds power to begin with, who writes the rules, and which institutions shape everyday life. This requires a dual strategy of openly challenging and constraining the actors who profit from precarity and instability, and proactively building public systems that make stability the default. Critically, the pro-democracy coalition must not be understood as dismissive of anti-institutionalist feelings wholesale, but rather recognizing its broad validity and addressing the underlying causes of elite failure and legitimate distrust in meaningful ways.

Recommendations for reconstruction

1 Rethink policy approaches that empower the wealthy to dominate

Ultimately, progressive policymaking cannot just be a palliative that only helps people cope with the excesses of wealth and power — that sands the sharpest edges from oligarchic capitalism but leaves its general structure intact. This means adopting a power building stance in domains such as tax policy. Rather than viewing the tax code solely as a vehicle for revenue generation, progressives must understand tax policy as a barometer for the balance of power in our economy. The reality is that mathematically-neutral paths to funding government agencies and programs are seldom power-neutral. Pushing more and more innovative progressive taxes on the wealthy and big industries can do more to improve democratic health. This is because taxing the rich is also about mitigating how much untaxed fortunes ultimately flow to campaign expenditures, lobbying, and other forms of political influence meant to enhance the political power of the wealthy at the public's expense.

2 Curb the influence of money on democracy

Economic reform will not endure if political rules continue to amplify the power of large donors and corporate interests. Policymakers should pursue tighter campaign finance rules, stronger disclosure requirements, and public financing models that equalize political participation. Moreover, states, through their [power](#) to authorize and shape corporate charters, should work to redefine what powers corporations can wield within their borders. As emerging industries like crypto-finance and prediction markets are enabling corruption and the profiting off of public office, lawmakers must implement strong safeguards. And lawmakers must resist institutionalizing these scam industries any further without a comprehensive public interest framework guiding regulation. At the very least, Congress should ban gifts above \$50 to members of the federal bench and Supreme Court, and codify both of the Constitution's emolument clauses to prevent the White House from being used as a storefront for personal gain.

3 Create a shared civic language for corporate abuse

Acknowledging the legitimacy of people's disillusionment in institutions requires us to develop a language for the shared experience of corporate abuse. When it comes to abuses of the state, we have a shared civic language — however imperfectly deployed — to describe government overreach or abuses and wrongdoing. It's self-evident, for

example, that ICE's illegal tactics run against the Constitution and the civil liberties it's meant to protect. Likewise, DOGE's experiments in public management and fiscal administration were [unpopular](#), and were not understood as attempts to make public institutions more efficient. We do not have the same cultural grasp on how corporations and oligarchs sow instability into our lives and make us miserable through business models and forms of domination justified by little more than the chasm in power between the wealthy and the public.

This is why going after abusive corporate actors in a visible and dramatic fashion is an essential first step. The Biden administration allowed agencies like the Department of Justice and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to be more aggressive in enforcing antitrust and consumer protection laws and making rules that target harmful corporate practices. This included usury-level interest rates on credit cards and junk fees in housing. But these fights were waged in technocratic arenas inside the beltway, and their salience to an ever more disillusioned public was always limited. They were not, in other words, *galvanizing* fights that resonated with and drew on public feelings of disenchantment, anger, and instability.

A notable exception was the FTC's proposed ban on noncompetes for workers. As Brian Callaci and Sandeep Vaheesan have [written](#): "This proposal attracted 26,000 public comments, of which more than 25,000 were supportive of the FTC rule. Thousands of people shared their personal experience with noncompete clauses and how they impede career progression and delay or deny entrepreneurial dreams".

By homing in on an issue that people felt in their day-to-day lives and using the extensive public comments to refine the rule, the FTC was able to develop a language and process that acknowledged the harms of a system where corporate actors had too much control over workers. This offered a policy response that took those harms seriously. In doing so, the FTC socialized both a diagnosis and a response that foregrounded the positive role that public institutions could play in checking corporate power.

4 Invest in the most promising sources of countervailing power

Another important step is finding the most promising sources of countervailing public power and investing in them. We must ask: where are extreme wealth and corporate domination being challenged most meaningfully? Tenant unions, for example, have proven effective (if outmatched) at extracting wins against the organized wealth of big landlords. In Kansas City, for example, organized tenants [won](#) a cap on rent increases and major repairs by forming a union and withholding rent payments for eight months. The Government can condition loans to negligent landlords on certain protections for tenants, to support stronger countervailing institutions.

Likewise, we must push for democracy in the economic sphere, including by leveraging the tools of government to make it easier to organize workplaces and build more democratic structures at work. Worker standard boards, for example, offer a promising opportunity for workers, government, and employers to provide recommendations for improving workplaces and worker welfare, especially in industries that are hard to unionize. Under this arrangement, fast food workers could assemble to discuss industry standards writ large to inform measures that a legislature can vote on. Besides the material improvements such boards could advance, they would also make democracy a daily practice where most people spend most of their lives. For democracy to flourish, it must be practiced beyond the occasional Tuesday in November. Policies that create predictable work schedules and more time away from work, such as paid family leave, not only create economic stability but also create possibilities for civic engagement.

Another potential avenue is to more vigorously promote [worker cooperatives](#) as an organizational form. Cooperative enterprises demonstrate that democratic participation at work can produce viable businesses while also fostering deeper connection between workers. A progressive administration could help facilitate the conversion of businesses into cooperatives through federal technical assistance, financing for new cooperatives, or simply by using the pulpit of an executive office to legitimize cooperatives as a core piece of a broader economic agenda.

5 Build state capacity that works for people

Equally important is reorienting state capacity toward the timely delivery of material investments and quality of life supports. Public options for healthcare, child care, and housing must not only be adequately funded but also enacted within a four year period, so that the public can feel material change before it can be reversed. This is a key lesson from the Biden era — the short-lived expansion of the Child Tax Credit didn't create a political coalition so much as a political backlash when it was taken away. Relatedly, while the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) made transformative investments, few of those investments delivered for everyday people on a politically salient time frame. Paired with shorter-term policies that met people's everyday needs, the IRA may have been more likely to generate a political coalition to build momentum for further public investments.

Building an effective state also means winding down harmful forms of state capacity — such as the sprawling and bloated immigration enforcement and surveillance apparatus — that drain public resources and decimate public trust. This might look like imposing greater limits on the arms of government have proven to do most harm — the Department of Homeland Security, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and the Customs and Border Protection Agency — as well as quickly unwinding private contracts that facilitate harm and surveillance.

Conclusion

Our traditional political sands are shifting, and the authoritarian coalition has spotted the opening and is aggressively advancing policies that further consolidate wealth and power at the top and in the executive in particular. At the same time, generational abuses like those uncovered in the Epstein emails have only served to validate the belief that pervasive incidents of corruption — and all the violent harm that has the potential to unleash on the most vulnerable — are not exceptions but rather a modus operandi for our ruling elites. In the wake of the Epstein scandal, anti-institutionalism not only has become more entrenched in our culture but also has tremendous moral force behind its core assumptions.

In response to anti-institutionalism and rising instability, this authoritarian coalition has even embraced — at least on face value — policies that have long been associated with progressives, such as an expanded Child Tax Credit embraced by Josh Hawley, President Trump promoting a [perverted](#) version of baby bonds in his Trump Accounts, and incomplete proposals to eliminate taxes on tips. These paltry offerings to people's economic stability are meant to distract us from the massive windfall the Trump family has seen from the presidency, armed militias snatching people off the streets, and the general entrenching of power where it is already held.

Pro-democracy advocates will find their efforts limited without truly addressing the reality of people's deep instability and the deep cynicism about the functioning of our existing institutions. The good news for those who want a vibrant, pluralistic democracy, is that authoritarian offerings will never actually tackle the underlying instability that people are facing. Pro-democracy actors must put forward bold, unapologetic proposals that actually create a flourishing society rooted in the dignity and economic stability of everyday people.

The authors would like to thank Shahrzad Shams and Sandeep Vaheesan for their thoughtful feedback and contributions to this paper.