

# Our Broken System Fails Everyday Americans

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We are not just fighting for a democracy that works for all Americans. We are fighting for all the other issues affecting our families and our communities. Our out-of-balance system dominated by wealthy special interests produces outcomes that fail to reflect our needs and concerns.

## AFFORDABLE COLLEGE

When Wall Street lobbyists for banks and other lenders urge our elected officials to vote against reducing the interest rates on student loan debt, crushing debt makes it harder for everyday Americans to get an education, earn a well-paid job, and attain the American Dream. Members of Congress have taken millions in political contributions from corporations and banks that profit the most from growing student loan balances. The amount Wall Street spent on elections nearly doubled in 2012 after the *Citizens United* decision, to over \$108 million.<sup>1</sup> U.S. Senators who voted against a bill in 2014 to lower interest rates for students and recent graduates received 58 percent of the donations made by the bank and lending lobby.<sup>2</sup>

## CLIMATE JUSTICE

While climate change deniers benefit from political contributions from the fossil fuel industry, we suffer extreme storms and natural disasters that threaten our homes, extreme droughts that threaten our food and water supply, and a planet that may soon no longer be inhabitable. In the 2014 election, energy special interests spent nearly \$100 million on federal elections, more than a \$20 million increase from industry spending on the 2010 mid-term elections.<sup>3</sup> The current U.S. Senators who reject human-caused climate change received seven times as much campaign cash from oil and gas interests as those who acknowledge the existence of climate change.<sup>4</sup>

## CRIMINAL JUSTICE

In the last 25 years we have seen the rise of the for-profit prison industry where more than 156 thousand Americans reside everyday. It should come as no coincidence that these corporate prisons have also spent more than \$10 million influencing our elections to oppose reforms that would hurt their bottom line.<sup>5</sup> And the explosion in spending on television attack advertisements in state supreme court elections has made courts less likely to rule in favor of defendants in criminal appeals.<sup>6</sup>

## ECONOMIC JUSTICE

Despite both the need and widespread support for a higher minimum wage and other measures that help low-wage workers, a small number of big-money donors have spent millions of dollars to keep wages low.<sup>7</sup> Big-box retailers such as Walmart, Home Depot, and Target spent more than \$30 million on elections and lobbying in the 2014 election cycle.<sup>8</sup>

## GUN VIOLENCE

Despite thousands of lives cut short by senseless and preventable gun violence, the gun industry's astonishing political spending has helped it secure a stranglehold on politicians at the state and federal levels. In the 2006 midterm elections, the National Rifle Association (NRA) spent a little more than \$3

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<sup>1</sup> Riestenberg, Jay. "[As Wall Street Profits Rise, Students Left Underwater.](#)" September 9, 2014

<sup>2</sup> Shaw, Donny. "[Senators Voting Against Warren Student Loan Bill Have More Bank Contributions.](#)" June 12, 2014

<sup>3</sup> Riestenberg, Jay. "[Whose Government? Whose Voice?: Climate Change.](#)" January 13, 2015

<sup>4</sup> Marks, Miriam. "[Senators Who Rejected Human-Caused Climate Change Received 7 Times as Much Money from Oil and Gas Interests.](#)" December 1, 2015

<sup>5</sup> Cohen, Michael. "[How for-profit prisons have become the biggest lobby no one is talking about.](#)" *The Washington Post*. April 28, 2015

<sup>6</sup> Joanna Shepherd and Michael S. Kang. "[Skewed Justice.](#)" October 21, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Riestenberg, Jay. "[Whose Government? Whose Voice?: Minimum Wage.](#)" January 13, 2015

<sup>8</sup> Catherine Ruetschlin and Sean McElwee "[Retail Politics: How America's Big-Box Retailers Turn Their Economic Power into Political Influence.](#)" November 24, 2014

million on federal elections. Fast forward eight years to 2014 -- after *Citizens United* -- and the NRA's total federal political spending jumped by almost 1,000 percent.<sup>9</sup>

## HEALTH CARE

The pharmaceutical industry spends some \$250 million every year lobbying Congress and donating to federal candidates<sup>10</sup> to resist government run healthcare and preserve policies that mean Americans pay more for prescription drugs than almost anywhere else in the world. If Medicaid were expanded in every state, it could have prevented 7,115 to 17,104 unnecessary deaths and 240,700 racked-up catastrophic medical bills each year. But corporate and billionaire funded groups like Americans for Prosperity and ALEC have spent millions lobbying and electing politicians to oppose the Medicaid expansion.<sup>11</sup> And in one of the more egregious examples of the healthcare industry's political influence, the state of Florida put thousands of children with heart defects at risk because of a change in state quality standards that came after a hospital, under investigation for failing to abide by those standards, contributed \$200,000 to support Republican politicians.<sup>12</sup>

## RACIAL JUSTICE

The dominance of big money in our politics makes it far harder for people of color to exert political power and effectively advocate for their interests as both wealth and power are consolidated by a small, very white, share of the population. In the 2012 election cycle, over 90 percent of federal campaign contributions of over \$200 came from majority white neighborhoods.<sup>13</sup> The trend continues in the 2016 cycle with Central Park zip codes providing more money to presidential candidates than all 1,300 majority Latino zip codes and all 1,200 majority African-American zip codes.<sup>14</sup> Elections funded primarily by wealthy, white donors mean that candidates as a whole are less likely to prioritize the needs of people of color; and that candidates of color are less likely to run for elected office, raise less money when they do, and are less likely to win.

## Conclusion

We can address the huge challenges facing our families and our nation when every voice is heard in our democracy and the best and brightest can run and serve in elected office. Strong protections to curb the costly influence of wealthy special interests and to increase access to voting will ensure government of, by, and for the people and allow us to tackle the big issues.

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<sup>9</sup> Riestenberg, Jay. "[Whose Government? Whose Voice?: Gun Control.](#)" January 13, 2015

<sup>10</sup> "[Pharmaceuticals/Health Products Summary.](#)" *Center for Responsive Politics.* February 19, 2016

<sup>11</sup> Sean McElwee and Vijay Das, "[The wealthy are ruining American health care.](#)" *Salon.* January 13, 2016

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Cohen and Katherine Grise, "[Heart doctors outraged Florida dumps hospital standards after big gifts to GOP.](#)" *CNN.* January 18, 2016

<sup>13</sup> Demos report: [Stacked Deck: How the Racial Bias in Our Big Money Political System Undermines Our Democracy and Our Economy](#)

<sup>14</sup> Every Voice Center report: [The Color of Money: Early Presidential Fundraising Shows White, Wealthy Donor Base](#)