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What Happened? Part 1

Truman ignored, Reagan embraced

Part 1 - Harry Truman's Sage Advice Ignored

Like many people in American civic life, I was shocked and sickened by the results of the recent election. My wife, Merle, and I try not to get trapped in a left-leaning media bubble. But I suppose that is what happened as we listen to NPR, watch MSNBC, and read publications like In These Times, The Nation, The Progressive, and Mother Jones. ☹️.

There is a lot of after-action review going on across the progressive-sphere – and we will be sharing the numbers with you as they emerge. Who voted for who, and – to the extent that can be known – why.

I've been a few calls where leading activists and progressive innovators shared their grief, anger, and first round of reflections from the massive losses Democrats suffered across America. There is even analysis along the lines of "The loss was not that massive – buck up!" There are pundits reminding us that Vice President Harris only had 100 days to mount her campaign. That the media has completely failed us by applying no standard of reporting to the Republican Party and its nominee while treating the Democratic Party and its nominee with a completely different standard of accountability.

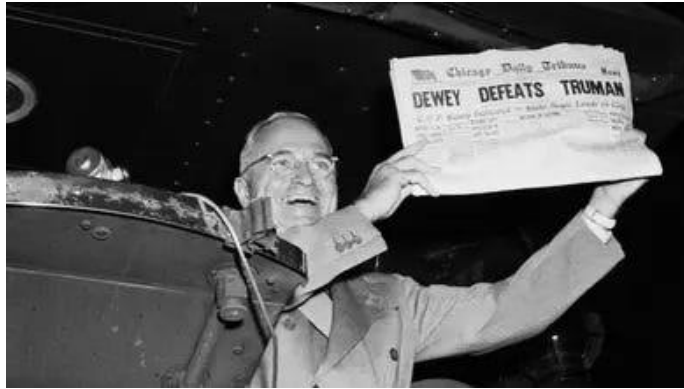
It will take a minute for all this to be sorted out, digested, and reckoned with.

But let me share with you my own take on "What Happened?"

Basically, what I assert has happened to America is the degrading and dissolving of the very notion of "public" – to the point where the concept has been drained of meaning and value. I believe this is the result of a fifty year long assault on "public" that is intentional, well-funded, and merciless in its prosecution and application.

You might say one political party, the Democrats, USED to be champions of "public" but have retreated and no longer are acting in that role. In my view, they have been punished for doing so. And I would argue that another political party, the Republicans, have made it their practice to attack "public" and have been rewarded over and over again for this effort.

To illustrate this view, I offer two Presidents – one retiring from public life, and one ascending.



First, I turn to [Harry Truman](#), 33rd President of the United States. You don't need to know anything about his political career other than that he ascended to the presidency upon the death of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1945, after serving as his Vice President for about three months. President Truman was an unapologetic champion of the [Roosevelt New Deal](#) and of the interests of the average working person in America.

I will offer some of [President Truman's parting words](#) to his Democratic Party peers offered at In May of 1952 the annual convention of the Americans For Democratic Action (ADA) at the Statler Hotel in Washington.

In spite of the various notions about the nomination in 1948, the outcome of the election that year pleased all of us here--particularly me, and it astonished a great many people. It simply astonished a great many people. Mark Twain said, in an inscription I have always had on my desk, "Always do right. It will please some people, and astonish the rest." Well, that's what we did in 1948. We astonished the pollsters and the sabotage press, and the opposition candidates--Republican, crackpot, and Dixiecrat. The results were good for the country, even though they set back the science of political forecasting for a full generation. I hope it set them back forever...when things look darkest for the Democrats, that you can count on the Republicans to do something that will save the day--that is, it will save the day for us. You can always count on the Republicans, in an election year, to remind the people of what the Republican Party really stands for. You can always count on them to make it perfectly clear before the campaign is over that the Republican Party is the party of big business, and that they would like to turn the country back to the big corporations and the big bankers in New York to run it as they see fit. They are just not going to do it... This year they are at it again. The Republicans think they have been so successful with their campaign of smears and character assassination that they have the Democrats on the run. And they just can't restrain themselves enough to hide their true colors until after the election. They are too impatient. First one way and then another they are giving themselves away. [He turned to the steel industry and the actions of the Republicans]... They threatened to wreck price control, and they're doing their best to do it. And what is the purpose of all this? The purpose is to preserve high profits for the steel companies and prevent wage increases for the steelworkers. That shows exactly where the Old Guard stands. It shows that their hearts lie with the corporations and not with the working people. It proves that the old Republican leopard hasn't changed a single spot. It ought to serve as a big, glaring danger sign to the voters of this country of what to expect if they turn the administration of the country over to the Republicans who are now in control of that party.

He then offered the advice that has been ignored by Democratic Party leaders since that day. He said:

The first rule in my book is that we have to stick by the liberal principles of the Democratic Party. We are not going to get anywhere by trimming or appeasing. And we don't need to try it. The record the Democratic Party has made in the last 20 years is the greatest political asset any party ever had in the history of the world. We would be foolish to throw it away. There is nothing our enemies would like better and nothing that would do more to help them win an election.

I've seen it happen time after time. When the Democratic candidate allows himself to be put on the defensive and starts apologizing for the New Deal and the fair Deal, and says he really doesn't believe in them, he is sure to lose. **The people**

don't want a phony Democrat. If it's a choice between a genuine Republican, and a Republican in Democratic clothing, the people will choose the genuine article, every time; that is, they will take a Republican before they will a phony Democrat, and I don't want any phony Democratic candidates in this campaign.

But when a Democratic candidate goes out and explains what the New Deal and fair Deal really are--when he stands up like a man and puts the issues before the people--then Democrats can win, even in places where they have never won before. It has been proven time and again.

Truman admonished his peers (and successors) not to stray from the legacy of the New Deal – that saved America from economic collapse after Republican failures to act – of delivering millions of jobs, economic prosperity, new roads, new parks, new post offices, and a sense of optimism and possibility created literally out of ashes and dust. Years later, another enormously successful progressive politician, [Paul Wellstone](#), a history teacher turned United States Senator, assumed the mantle of a progressive champion for the people. [He said](#) “I don’t represent the big oil companies, the big pharmaceuticals, or the big insurance industry. They already have great representation in Washington. It’s the rest of the people that need representation.” He often repeated President Truman’s advice when he was interviewed. This is how I first learned of the quote.



Wellstone’s political legacy is present in the current administration of [Governor Tim Walz](#) and by the organization [re:Power](#), a training operation that started out as Wellstone Action. “Since 2003, we’re proud to have supported over 100,000 candidates, elected officials, campaign managers, and community organizers from across the country through training, coaching, facilitation, campaigning, and capacity building.” I was one of those attendees, doing the full-day training in Chicago in 2004.

What is at the heart of President Truman and Senator Wellstone’s admonition to the Democratic Party? I think it’s pretty simple. Big Government can and must work FOR the people. It has done so with great success in the past (and present, if you only look) and will do so in the future.

The Democrats stand for making government an instrument of opportunity, justice, and equity. We recognize all the faults of our past and imperfections of the present – nevertheless, we believe that the American system is on the road to justice, and we ought never shrink from demanding bold solutions from it. We recognize the importance of the private sector and American business – but we assert that the success OF the private sector stands ON the sturdy infrastructure OF the public sector.

As President Truman reminded us, the Republican Party stands with and for the business class and against the working person. We should never forget this, even though many working people apparently have. I have often said that the goal of the modern Republican Party is return America to the 1830’s – with chattel slavery (people working for free or next to free), no regulations on business, no income taxes, a nasty version of the Christian Bible guiding the civics of the country, women confined to the or chained to the loom, and no real central government other than to provide a standing army for national defense. In this version of a paternalistic, right-wing Christian America, we home school our kids, shoot our food for dinner (so to speak), and it’s every person for themselves while corporations run unchecked to reap massive profits and despoil the environment with impunity.

What happened on November 5, 2024? The Democrats suffered defeat because they did not follow the advice of Truman and Wellstone. **The American people picked the real Republicans and rejected the Phony Republicans.**

In Part 2 of this essay, I will explain the other side of this story. America heeded the advice and embraced the philosophy of another President, Ronald Reagan.

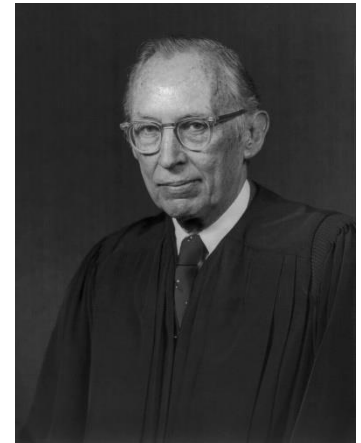
What Happened, Part 2

Powell's memo, Reagan's message

This is the second part of my take on What Happened (to America) in the recent election. My basis premise is that the advice and world views of two different presidents have been at play – [one being ignored](#) – that was from President Truman, and one being embraced, from President Reagan.

As a preface for understanding the message and methods that President Reagan advocated and practiced, we have to remind ourselves of the substance and impact of the Powell Memo from 1971, authored by [Lewis Powell](#). [I reviewed this memo and its impact in an earlier CivicNote](#).

“American economic system is under broad attack.” This attack, Powell maintained, required mobilization for political combat: “Business must learn the lesson . . . that political power is necessary; that such power must be assiduously cultivated; and that when necessary, it must be used aggressively and with determination—without embarrassment and without the reluctance which has been so characteristic of American business.” Moreover, Powell stressed, the critical ingredient for success would be organization: “Strength lies in organization, in careful long-range planning and implementation, in consistency of action over an indefinite period of years, in the scale of financing available only through joint effort, and in the political power available only through united action and national organizations.” [\[Read more at billmoyers.com\]](#) Download the memo at www.tinyurl.com/Powell-Memo-1971.



Powell's Memo became the playbook for American business and conservative political leaders to re-shape the US civic eco-system. For his service to American capitalism, Powell was elevated to the United States Supreme Court, where he served from 1971 to 1987. From [Wikipedia](#):

The memo called for corporate America to become more aggressive in molding society's thinking about business, government, politics and law in the U.S. It inspired wealthy heirs of earlier American industrialists, the [Earhart Foundation](#) (whose money came from an oil fortune), and the [Smith Richardson Foundation](#) (from the cough medicine dynasty)^[17] to use their private charitable foundations, which did not have to report their political activities, to join the [Carthage Foundation](#), founded by [Richard Mellon Scaife](#) in 1964.^[17] The Carthage Foundation pursued Powell's vision of a pro-business, anti-socialist, minimally government-regulated America based on what he thought America had been in the heyday of early American industrialism, before the [Great Depression](#) and the rise of [Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal](#).

Since 1998 American business has spent [\\$50.4 BILLION on federal lobbying](#). Add to that billions of dollars on state and local influence peddling and you will see that Powell's Memo has impacted virtually every aspect of American society. There is no aspect of your life that this work has not shaped and directed.

I would argue that one of the necessary components of this fifty year push to defend and shore up capitalism is to abase and devalue the public sector. Government is seen as a hindrance, an enemy to progress and the righteous striving of business and the market.

This point of view achieved its mightiest champion in the election of [Ronald Reagan](#) as president in 1980. A former actor and television pitchman, Reagan oozed charm and avuncular wisdom and common-sense practicality. He was, for decades, revered by conservatives and Republicans for his steadfast opposition to Russia and Communism.

Within the first five minutes of his [1981 Inaugural Address](#), President Reagan made himself clear:

The economic ills we suffer have come upon us over several decades. They will not go away in days, weeks, or months, but they will go away. They will go away because we as Americans have the capacity now, as we've had in the past, to do

whatever needs to be done to preserve this last and greatest bastion of freedom. **In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.** From time to time we've been tempted to believe that society has become too complex to be managed by self-rule, that government by an elite group is superior to government for, by, and of the people. Well, if no one among us is capable of governing himself, then who among us has the capacity to govern someone else? All of us together, in and out of government, must bear the burden. The solutions we seek must be equitable, with no one group singled out to pay a higher price.

This was his main message, and he returned to it many times during his tenure. Here is another famous quote from an [August 1986 press conference](#):

I think you all know that I've always felt the nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I'm from the Government, and I'm here to help. A great many of the current problems on the farm were caused by government-imposed embargoes and inflation, not to mention government's long history of conflicting and haphazard policies.

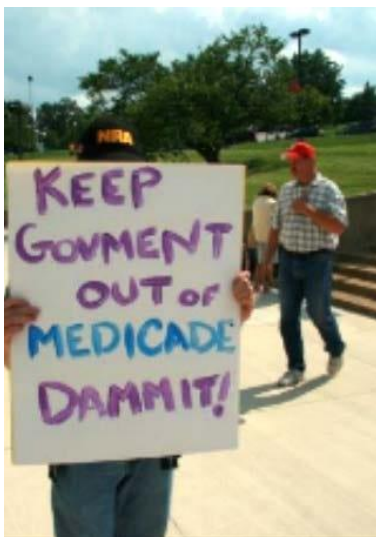
You can relive that moment in United State presidential messaging by [watching this video](#):



President Ronald Reagan Quote "I'm from the Government and I'm here to help."

are receiving substantial government benefits or even if your property and life have been saved BY the government.

How bizarre and inexplicable has this trend become? Well, just look at these images – my wife, Merle, saw a news item featuring these protests years ago and has never stopped talking about. “Are these people completely stupid? she asks



in exasperation. OK, but who runs the program then?

At a town hall meeting in Simpsonville, South Carolina hosted by Republican Congressman Robert Inglis in the summer of 2009, an angry senior citizen thundered: “keep your government hands off my Medicare.”

So, tens of millions of Americans who benefit every day from major government programs are actively marching, speaking, and voting to destroy those very programs. And I am not even going to get into the billions of dollars spent by FEMA to help people in flood, fire, and hurricane stricken parts of the country. Somehow, we are all hypnotized into believing that Big Government is bad and Big Business is good.

That, in a nutshell (really nutty) is What Happened.

America’s Nonprofit Sector – Stop Whining!

Boo Hoo, the President will be able to kill any nonprofit on a whim

Has your email inbox filled up with pleas from all sorts of nonprofits wringing their collective hands about the election and passing on news of the clowns Trump is putting into his Cabinet and the dire consequences, blah, blah, blah? Mine sure is.

And the latest calamity to befall America, according to these organizations is the threat posed by H.R. 9495, the so-called “[Stop Terror-Financing and Tax Penalties on American Hostages Act](#).” This bill would, [according to the ACLU](#), would “grant the executive branch extraordinary power to investigate, harass, and effectively dismantle any nonprofit organization — including news outlets, universities, and civil liberties organizations like ours — by stripping them of their tax-exempt status based on a unilateral accusation of wrongdoing.” Get the [text of the bill here](#).

This bill was introduced by [Rep.Claudia Tenney](#), [R-NY-24]. Congresswoman Tenney is an election denier, [according to the Insurrection Index](#). She recently raised over [\\$1.1 million from PACs](#) from the finance and real estate industries. Her most recent single largest contributor was the American Israel Public Affairs Committee ([AIPAC](#)), [at \\$39,650](#). AIPAC has been led by [Howard Kohr](#) for over 30 years.



This bill was [just passed by the House](#), with all the Republicans voting for it plus 15 Democrats. These Democrats are:

- Colin Allred—Texas
- Yadira D. Caraveo—Colorado
- Ed Case—Hawaii
- Henry Cuellar—Texas
- Don Davis—North Carolina

- Jared Golden—Maine
- Vicente Gonzalez—Texas
- Suzanne Marie Lee—Nevada
- Jared Moskowitz—Florida
- Jimmy Panetta—California
- Marie Gluesenkamp Perez—Washington
- Brad Schneider—Illinois
- Tom Suozzi—New York
- Norma Torres—California
- Debbie Wasserman Schultz—Florida

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It is unlikely that President Biden will sign this bill, if it were to pass the Senate. But - my dear colleagues in the nonprofit sector – stop complaining and running after the horses long after they have escaped the corral and run amok across the plains. It is way too late to ask me for money to continue your pathetic efforts at running after long gone horses. **You have ZERO chance of defeating this measure** once the new Congress is seated in January.

Your panicked pleas for funds to do this and stop that are exhausting and will do NOTHING to change the game on the ground. Stop it.

I call on the leaders of the nonprofit sector to **STOP ASKING FOR FUNDS and STOP STUDYING** the carnage Trump and his Nazi, Insurrectionist, plutocratic, religious fanatics, human rights shredders, science deniers, and white supremacist traitors have wrought and will bring to America.

[I have been begging you for over forty years](#) to chart a path to power in order to govern for justice, service, science, peace, beauty, and equity.

Here's what you SHOULD do. Combine brains, resources, bodies, and means to **DEFEAT the 15 Democrats who voted for this liberty shredding piece of legislation**. Announce a coalition right now and find servant-leaders from those districts to announce for 2026 immediately. Sigh. I know you will not do this and therefore will not undertake the [larger task I have laid out for you](#).

America's Nonprofit Sector Documents Its Own Powerlessness

23 years of self-examination leads to nothing...

You might say I'm a recovering addict – someone who was addicted to nonprofit behavior and who has tried to kick that habit and not return to it.

Since 1973 I have started or led 14 nonprofit enterprises in the arts, community development, and civic engagement. I have been a managing director, a board member, a board president, a consultant to nonprofits, and a professor of nonprofit management and policy at several Chicago universities.

What are the characteristics of the nonprofit addict? Dependence on funders. Lack of power. Constantly marketing services that your users will not pay the full freight for delivering. Isolation and lack of peripheral vision – living in silos. In many parts of the nonprofit sector, we see leaders who run outfits that deliver direct services warp themselves into

ambassadors of need, want, social ill, and “lack” as they have to constantly make the case that their constituents need stuff, lack ability, and have a lot of problems that need attention.

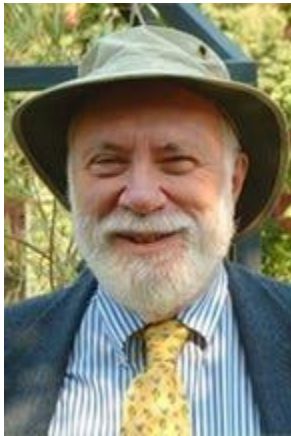
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But it is the lack of power that most concerns me – especially in the wake of the Disaster Election. Despite the numbers that the stewards of the nonprofit sector keep manifesting – total number of nonprofits, total number of workers, total combined budgets, economic impacts, etc., etc. – the nonprofit sector remains completely powerless to effect meaningful social change in America. You could say that it is by design. Nonprofits (that is the most common type – often referred to as five oh one cee threes, after the relevant section of the United States Tax Code) are forbidden to endorse candidates for public office and are quite restricted in their political activities.

But, even with that extremely limiting restriction, nonprofits can do – and ought to – a wide range of civic and election-related activities. These permitted activities include lobbying, voter registration, voter education, candidate forums, issue forums, leadership training, and even training people to run for office and to manage political and issue campaigns. Two extremely effective organizations pushing work in this space are The Alliance For Justice’s [Bolder Advocacy Program](#) and [Nonprofit Vote](#).

But the nonprofit sector, as a whole, remains inept and seemingly blind to its inability to change America in such a way that there will no need for charity going forward – no need to chase a herd of policy horses after they have bolted from the civic corral, so to speak.

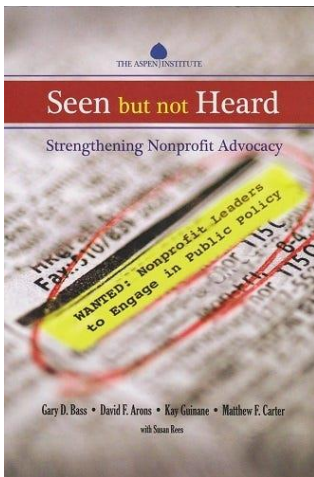
The earliest critique of the nonprofit sector’s ability to impact large-scale change I have in my possession is an essay “[The Decline of Progressive Policy and the New Philanthropy](#)” from 2001, by [Professor Robert O. Bothwell](#). Professor Bothwell is a Professor Emeritus of History at the Munk School of Global Affairs, University of Toronto. Professor Bothwell charts the arc of American philanthropy over the prior forty years with a focus on funding of progressive, issue-oriented change work. His conclusion is stark. Our funders have killed this work.



“...progressive advocacy organizations continue to work within their policy silos, often hampered as much by their foundation funding as helped. [Researchers] found that foundation funding of nonprofit advocacy at the state level (California) was so categorical that the boundaries defining nonprofit missions became “barriers to permeation and cross-issue connections.” Organizations operating in isolation failed to work with stakeholders outside their traditional networks, thereby failing to “advance broader changes.” Therefore, with so little philanthropic funding from foundations and corporations, and so much of it trapped in project funding and policy silos, progressives have had difficulty advancing their agendas of equity and justice for all. In contrast, conservative foundations’ *strategic* philanthropy -- not just grant dollars -- underwrote a public policy infrastructure of think tanks, lobbying networks, academic programs and new media for the increasingly powerful conservative movement.”

My own experience over forty years of civic work in Chicago completely confirms these findings. The funders of philanthropy in Chicago are gate keepers and silo operators. They most definitely do not want serious economic justice change here. What has been the results of this fundamental condition of nonprofit operations?

Jump forward to 2007 and the publication of “[Seen But Not Heard – Strengthening Nonprofit Advocacy](#)” – a depressing title, to be sure – by Bass, Arons, Guianne, Carter, and Rees, published by [The Aspen Institute](#).



This study reported findings from 1,738 organizations. [The book asserts that:](#)

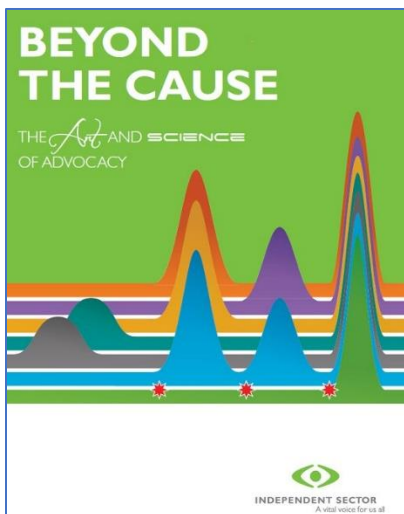
“If nonprofits want to pursue their organizational missions effectively, they need to be actively engaged in public policy. The challenge to the nonprofit sector is that advocacy, which should be an ordinary organizational activity, remains extraordinary, according to the authors. They say a cultural change is needed that returns the country to an earlier time when nonprofit advocacy, including lobbying, was a more frequent activity. The authors contend that lobbying is an honorable activity, one that should not be compromised or apologized for, and one that is an essential component of our constitutional system... The book concludes that increased and consistent participation by nonprofits in policy matters provides a much-needed balance to for-profit lobbying and “immeasurably improves the quality of decisions that government makes.”

I don't think the authors got the “cultural change” they asked for. I don't see any evidence that they pitched in there or that the Aspen Foundation did much of anything in that regard. I would say that the Aspen Institute IS seen AND heard and in [2022 enjoyed revenues of \\$190 million!](#) The top ten executives earned a staggering \$5.1 million in total compensation!

(66) JESSIE WOOLLEY-WILSON	1.00	X					0	0	0
TRUSTEE									
(67) ELLIOT GERSON	40.00		X				545,243	0	60,654
EXECUTIVE VP									
(68) DAVID LANGSTAFF	40.00		X				490,660	0	51,504
EXEC VICE PRESIDENT									
(69) NAMITA KHASAT	40.00		X				486,422	0	30,327
CFO/CAO/TREASURER - UNTIL 06/2022									
(70) MARIA ACEBAL	40.00		X				315,896	0	30,115
VP STRATEGIC DEV CORP SECRETARY									
(71) ANDREW AXELROD EVP FINANCE	40.00		X				103,929	0	1,280
EBD, TREASURER - AS OF 09/2022									
(72) CYNTHIA MCKEE	40.00				X		428,564	0	12,052
EVP INSTITUTIONAL ADVANCEMENT									
(73) STEPHEN PATRICK	40.00				X		355,509	0	66,870
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR									
(74) ANN MOSLE	40.00				X		352,297	0	66,870
VP, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR									
(75) VIVIAN SCHILLER	40.00				X		367,026	0	45,404
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR									
(76) ERIKA MALLIN	40.00				X		352,522	0	31,630
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR									
1b Sub-Total									
c Total from continuation sheets to Part VII, Section A									
d Total (add lines 1b and 1c)							4,644,508	0	454,426

I don't know about you, but I would LOVE to be seen like that.

Now we go forward five years, to 2012, when the [Independent Sector](#) published a 254 page study called “[Beyond the Cause – The Art and Science of Advocacy](#).” The study was based on more than 100 interviews, three surveys, three case studies, four coalition profiles, and a detailed examination of the nonprofit sector's track record and approach to advocacy. It was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.



This massive tome offers five essential ingredients for successful advocacy – I will not bore you with these here – but, suffice it to say, that none of those ingredients got baked into any sort of substantive pie of justice, equity, sanity, science, or human rights advocacy over the past 12 years. Perhaps Melinda and Bill ought to ask for their money back. I could not find any hard numbers in this report about how many nonprofits were doing what sort of advocacy where.

I did find this language on page 205 (good luck if you can make it that far):

“The current fiscal climate demands a strong nonprofit voice on public policy matters now more than ever. The decisions lawmakers and the administration will be making in the next few years could have a profound effect on the ability of large segments of the charitable sector to fulfill their missions... A detailed analysis of the sector’s track record and approach to public policy advocacy on sector-wide issues found notable gaps between their strategies and those of the organizations that achieved their

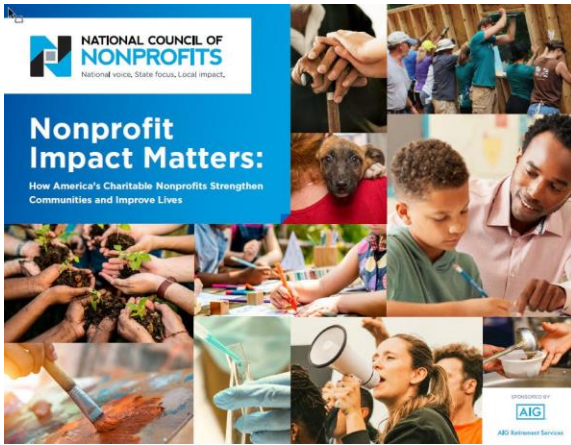
public policy goals on a consistent basis... Based on the results of this study, we have concluded that **the way in which organizations engage in sector-wide issues will not yield consistently positive results except in isolated instances, because these organizations lack the incentives to work together and a structure that enables the pooling of resources**, among other considerations. [emphasis added]”

Not exactly a clear and compelling call to action. What is one to do with this document? How can a nonprofit leader who yearned for his organization and his sector to be powerful in changing America us this document to get stuff done? No way, no how.

However, the Independent Sector, as an organization, certainly mastered the art and science of raising money. In [2023 they enjoyed revenues of \\$7.4 million](#). Their [top seven executives made a total of \\$2.1 million](#) in total compensation.

(18) JEFF MOORE	38.00								
CHIEF STRATEGY OFFICER				X			254,541	0	41,389
(19) KRISTINA GAWGRY	38.00					X	136,004	0	25,008
CHIEF MKTG & COMM OFFICER THRU 6/2023									
(20) BENJAMIN KERSHAW	38.00					X	145,054	0	11,074
DIR, PUBLIC POLICY & GOV'T RELATIONS									
(21) ELYSE HARRINGTON	38.00					X	143,990	0	15,791
DIRECTOR OPERATIONS									
(22) HABIB MALLOUM BAKO	38.00					X	134,367	0	21,938
SR. DIR, COMMUNITY BLDG THRU 9/2023									
(23) RASHIDA MCCOY	38.00					X	131,440	0	16,375
DIR, STRATEGIC MKTG & DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT									
(24) DANIEL J CARDINALI	0.00								
FORMER PRESIDENT & CEO						X	126,087	0	0

Next, we jump to 2019 and the [National Council of Nonprofits](#) published a snappy 44 page report called “[Nonprofit Impact Matters: How America’s Charitable Nonprofits Strengthen Communities and Improve Lives.](#)”



Filled with compelling numbers, colorful charts, and assertions of nonprofit benefits to society, this report again buries the lead and we have to go to page 34 to find that:

Research shows that nonprofits with the most extraordinary levels of impact do not focus exclusively on either advocacy or direct service; rather, the highest-performing nonprofits do both, creating a virtuous cycle in which policy advocacy and service delivery each inform and enhance the impact of the other. **Yet, compared to the business sector and government sector, nonprofits have been sitting silently on the sidelines...** For this report, we collected the newest-available data on how many 501(c)(3) nonprofits reported lobbying activities in

2016. The results are sobering: On average, fewer than 3 percent of nonprofits engaged in any lobbying at the local, state, or federal levels. Just 3 percent, compared to the 100 percent with the legal right to do so. [emphasis added]

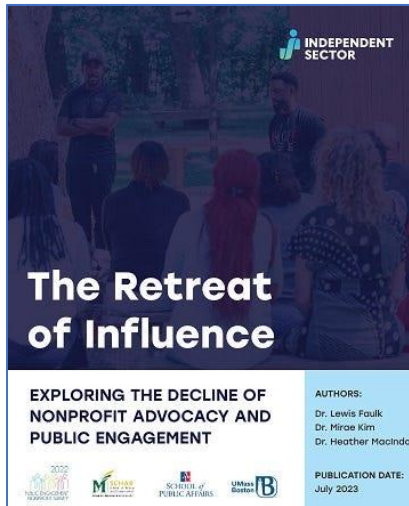
Maybe that's why the earlier Independent Sector report did not report on how many nonprofits actually engaged in the "art and science of advocacy" because the sad truth was/is – that most do nothing of the sort.

BUT, the National Council has a impact that really matters – in [2023 it enjoyed revenues of \\$2.1 million](#). Their top five executives received a total comp package of \$1.3 million.



(15) Charles T Delaney President & CEO	70.00				X				450,000	0	33,907
(16) Donna Murray-Brown VP of Strategy and Development	55.00					X			195,800	0	11,038
(17) David L Thompson VP of Public Policy	55.00					X			228,660	0	22,284
(18) Richard Cohen Chief Operating Officer/Chief Communications Offic	55.00					X			184,900	0	20,723
(19) Amy Silver O'Leary Director of Knowledge Sharing	50.00					X			115,757	0	15,234

Finally, we end our saga in 2023. That's when the Independent Sector published an 81 page report titled "[The Retreat of Influence – Exploring the Decline of Nonprofit Advocacy and Public Engagement](#)." This report had some weighty collaborators: The George Mason University Schar School of Policy and Government, the American University School of Public Affairs, and the University of Massachusetts Boston's McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies.



So many depressing findings:

- **A significantly lower proportion of nonprofits report advocating or lobbying compared to 20 years ago.** Only 31% of nonprofits report engaging in advocacy or lobbying over the last five years — less than half the percentage in 2000.
- **Significantly fewer nonprofits know what advocacy activities are legally allowed compared to 20 years ago.** In 2000, over half of 501(c)(3) public charities knew they could support or oppose federal legislation, compared to fewer than one-third today.
- **Only 13% of nonprofits conduct nonpartisan activities to help people vote,** despite being more effective than any other type of organization in getting people of all political persuasions to vote. Among nonprofits that advocate, 1 in 5 provide people with nonpartisan voter information.

- **Although the majority of nonprofits have a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) statement, only 36% of them engage in policy activities to create more equitable systems.**

[The press release](#) accompanying the report stated that the organization will “dig deeper” into the findings and confessed “We need to change. We need more nonprofit leaders stepping into deeper civic engagement and public policy advocacy, and more funders giving nonprofit leaders the financial assistance they need to do that work.”

Have you seen any evidence of deep digging or any real change in the way America's nonprofit sector does systematic change for justice, equity, science, service, human rights, voting rights, or any damn thing? I sure have not.

I think I'm beginning to see a trend here. Large policy-centered national nonprofit think-tank sorts of organizations that are fat with revenue and super-well paid staff periodically look at the issue of power and change and conclude that they suck at it. But, in the meantime, they collect tens of millions of charity dollars annually and their leaders lead live the good life. But they sure do know how to issue thick reports full of bad news.

How's this for digging deeper and changing the order of business? All these large nonprofits go out of business, and we reinvest their funding in these things:

1. Register 10 million to vote — people of color, people younger than 25, people in neglected and disinvested communities.
2. Train 10,000 servant-leaders to conduct public meetings lifting up the public sector — leading a movement for “More Public!” (see [my earlier CivicNotes post](#)).
3. Recruit, inspire, train, and equip 100,000 servant-leaders to run for local office in 2026 (assuming we still have elections) as champions of service, science, equity, justice, beauty, and peace — and who pledge to build out More Public and Great Public once elected.
4. Build a national platform to continue this work and support these leaders in their journey to serve and govern.



www.tinyurl.com/TT-NPQ-What-Now

I am still reeling from the results of the 2024 election. It was [far worse](#) than I could have imagined. There is so much I don't pretend to understand about why Donald Trump was elected. While numbers can be viewed in countless ways, here are a few ways to look at who voted for Trump. Some sample numbers: Trump won 47 percent of voters ages 18 to 29, 53 percent of White women of all ages, 43 percent of all voters with a college degree, and 35 percent of all urban voters.

I've been on several calls with activist leaders, and honestly, no one has a clue. I am sure there will be many books written, papers published, conferences convened, and theories put forth.

But you know what the labor activist and songwriter [Joe Hill said](#), just before his execution in Utah in 1915, "Don't waste any time mourning. Organize!"

A Basic Theory of Political Action

When it comes to effective organizing, I have a unified theory of civics that looks something like this: **Message** leads to **Members** leads to **Money** leads to **Means**.

That is, people become politically engaged by first hearing a message that resonates powerfully with them. They see something, hear something, experience something that speaks to them. It may be a call to action or some inspirational or inflammatory communication that addresses a need or a desire of theirs.

Only after hearing and aligning with a powerful and meaningful message will a person decide to affiliate and join some effort or campaign.

And only after identifying as a supporter or member will a person donate money or volunteer.

If this cycle is powerful and attracts the right mix of supporters, it can establish the means of sustainability—some permanent architecture or civic infrastructure to perpetuate itself. Nonprofits, labor unions, and cause-fired campaigns exemplify how this cycle plays out.

Political campaigns mobilize for an intense period of time, but after the election, that architecture dissolves, and there is little left to engage—until the next campaign.

How the Right Built Their Civic Infrastructure

I wrote about how the far right and their big business allies built a civic ecosystem in a [HuffPost Chicago column in 2017](#) and more recently in my CivicNotes newsletter [here](#) and [here](#). Robert Reich offers a [similar explanation](#) in “The Memo that Broke American Politics.”

In my take on this narrative, I also emphasize the role of the [religious right](#) and the [Christian Coalition](#), which I first had to [confront directly](#) when the [group was attempting to dismantle](#) the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) back in 1991.

Long story short: Too much of the US civic ecosystem for the last 50 years has been driven by forces that favor a limited social welfare role for the federal government (sometimes misleadingly labeled “small government”), a paternalistic White male-dominated view of reality, and a desire to have America ruled by a particularly cruel version of the Christian Bible.

This architecture [is fueled](#) by powerful messaging, and of course by money from members of the base, rich individuals, and [well-endowed foundations](#) (themselves [legacies of rich White businesspeople](#)).

A key component of this architecture is an ongoing and methodic process of vetting and training candidates to run for local office. The religious right has been using the tools and infrastructure of their evangelical religious movement and member institutions for decades. [The Christian Coalition](#) adroitly uses its installed base of members and connections to evangelical religious organizations to recruit members, raise money, and develop leaders and candidates.

This sort of political work happens across the country, and is out in the open and well documented. See [Evangelicals at the Ballot Box](#) (1996), [The Christian Coalition: Dreams of Restoration, Demands for Recognition](#) (1997), [Religion and Politics in the United States](#) (2003), [The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America](#) (2005), and [The Power Worshippers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism](#) (2019), to name a few books.

So, we have a sketch of how we got here. But what do we do now? And what would a liberal civic infrastructure look like?

Toward a Civic Infrastructure of “Servant Leaders”

As noted above, civic infrastructure starts with a message, builds membership, raises money, and develops a means to sustain itself to thrive.

So, let’s begin with the message. The message I propose is a call for “More public!” The right has worked relentlessly to [degrade the concept of “public”](#) and encourage Americans to hate and fear the government. To say the obvious, we are not going to charity our way out of structural inequality or the climate crisis. Perhaps it would be better expressed as “Put Us to Work (Great Jobs), Deliver Happiness, Save the Planet.”

This view resonates with at least some in philanthropy. Not long ago, [Dr. Carmen Rojas](#), president of [Marguerite Casey Foundation](#), [argued](#) that “this moment provides an opening for movements to shift public dollars to support the public goods our nation so desperately needs and to ensure that our dollars, in the public sector, are used to realize our dreams.”

Regardless of the exact message, the next step is to organize and *elect* [servant leaders](#) to local office in 2026. I offer the aspirational goal of electing 100,000 progressive leaders, which, given that there are over [500,000 local officials](#) in the United States, works out to one leader in five.

These candidates would pledge themselves to fight for service, science, justice, equity, beauty, and peace. We must chart a path to power in order to govern. Everything else must be put on hold.

Mobilizing Money and Partnerships to Support Local Leaders

Let's say the effort to develop and elect 100,000 local leaders succeeds. Congratulations! But winning a local office is merely one step.

To understand what is required, every nonprofit leader and movement activist should know about [the Leadership Institute](#). As its website indicates, "Founded in 1979 by its president, Morton Blackwell, the Leadership Institute increases the number and effectiveness of conservative leaders in the public policy process. More than 300,000 conservatives have become leaders through Leadership Institute training."

The Leadership Institute has a spiffy headquarters in Arlington, VA, that includes offices, classrooms, and a broadcast studio. It offers hundreds of [political trainings](#) annually and [raised \\$39.2 million in 2022](#). It is super effective at what it does. Some of its fabled alumni include [Karl Rove](#), [Ralph Reed](#), and [Grover Norquist](#). The institute combines thinking and action across the sectors of big business, religious fundamentalism, and raw power politics.

What exists on the left? Nothing to that scale.

Don't get me wrong, there are great organizations like [re:power](#) (the evolved Wellstone Action organization), [Vote Run Lead](#), [She Should Run](#), and [Run for Something](#). But in 2022, these groups took in a combined total of \$16.9 million, less than half of what the Leadership Institute took in. And, of course, the Leadership Institute also has more than 40 years of history behind it.

How can this gap be closed? One possible path involves [the Movement Voter Project](#), which raises millions of dollars annually to fund on-the-ground, frontline grassroots political organizing work in battleground states. They are in intimate contact with dozens of effective groups which are, in turn, deeply connected to thousands—if not tens of thousands—of grassroots organizers and leaders.

But we should think of the mobilizing effort more broadly. Consider the [American Library Association](#) (ALA), a professional organization serving America's librarians. It has some 48,000 members from across America's 123,000 public libraries. Our [public libraries](#) have seen some of the most ferocious and sustained political attacks—with book bans and state laws designed to punish and even jail librarians who circulate the "wrong" sorts of books ([especially LGBTQ+ books](#)). According to the [School Library Journal](#), 24 percent of school librarians were harassed in 2023 over their jobs.

Our local librarians are well-known and trusted people who have devoted their lives to education, access, freedom of expression, and advancing knowledge. And they have been politically effective, [successfully organizing](#) for a ban on book bans in Illinois last year.

What if the Movement Voter Project teamed up with the ALA and one or more candidate training operations mentioned above and aggressively recruited members to get prepped to run for local office—say, library board, school board, or city council? You can see how a civic infrastructure begins to emerge.

Although this is just a sketch, it's worth noting that librarians aren't the only potential allies. What if there were similar partnerships with the [American Federation of Teachers](#), [Americans for the Arts](#), the [American Institute of Architects](#), the [National School Boards Association](#), the [National Association of Social Workers](#), and the [National Academy of Sciences](#)?

If the goal were 100,000 servant leaders, these bodies—and others like them—could inspire and propel 10,000 members from their ranks to get trained and run. They could also potentially help raise funds—[even if they must set up parallel structures](#) like 501c4 organizations to do it—thereby providing a possible basis to sustain candidate development over time.

I can see a grand center or space, either physical or virtual, where all such prospective candidates can access mentorship, connect with progressive vendors (printing, polling, and so on), get access to research and legal advice, and meet one another to share and collaborate.

Next Steps

Social justice advocates *can* organize on this scale. But it requires a shift in the nation's political culture, and we must think big and go big. Only in this way will social justice values of civic love, civic opportunity, civic equity, and civic justice find their way into the public sphere.

If you agree, I invite you to follow [@More Public](#) on Blue Sky. Share ideas, methods, and means. Share stories of your most #LovedPublic—perhaps testimony about your experiences with public places and spaces as well as ideas for making More Public happen.





Tom Tresser Public Defender Civic Educator



In 1990 I was a very successful theater producer in Chicago (twice has three shows running at same time, created the Chicago Young Playwrights Festival – which is heading into it's 39th season). I learned about the attacks on the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) at the League of Chicago Theatre's (LCT) summer retreat. At my urging the LCT created a Advocacy Committee, chaired by Roche Schuller of the Goodman Theatre. The League then hired me to be an organizer for the performing arts community and we ginned up a series of unprecedented actions to get our stakeholders to fight for the NEA (see <https://www.tresser.com/save-the-nea>).

We did more than our fair share. But sadly, **America's creative sector lost the Culture Wars** and has pretty much stood on the sidelines, along with the rest of America's nonprofit sector, since then. The end result – America's civics hijacked by the Far Right and everything they sought to accomplish is taking place – right now.

The Other Side has been relentless in its savage attack on the arts, human rights, science, and all things public. They have plotted a path to power and governance. We have not. **See these two front pages from the New York Times THIRTY YEARS APART.**

Christian Coalition Voter Guide '92

VOTER GUIDE

Choice in Education (Vouchers) Tax Funds for Obscene Art Balanced Budget Amendment

Raising Income Taxes Abortion on Demand Homosexual Rights

U.S. House District 14							
Jonathan Abram Reich (D)	D	D	D	D	D	D	D
Dennis Hastert (R)	O	O	U	O	O	O	S
U.S. House District 15							
Charles Mattis (D)	U	O	S	O	O	O	S
Tom Ewing (R)	O	O	S	O	O	O	S
U.S. House District 16							
John Cox (D)	S	S	O	S	S	S	S
Don Manzullo (R)	O	O	S	O	O	O	S
U.S. House District 17							
Lane Evans (D)	S	S	O	S	S	S	O
Ken Schloemer (R)	D	D	D	D	D	D	D

I have been following the Far Right since 1991 – see the Voter's Guide distributed by The Christian Coalition in 1992. A congressman earned a "Yes" on "Tax Funds for Obscene Art" by voting for the NEA at any time. In this case, the incumbent, John Cox, was moderate-liberal Democrat who supported the arts, labor, the environment, and women's rights. He was defeated by Don Manzullo, who was an extremely conservative member and led attacks on all those issues and served in Congress until 2013.

I have tracked the Christian Coalition's attacks on arts organizations from Clearwater, Florida to Anchorage, Alaska.

I have begged the American Arts Council and many other professional organizations that serve America's creative professionals to organize and FIGHT BACK.

If you would like to see what we did at the LCT back in 1991, go to <https://www.tresser.com/save-the-nea>.

If you would like to read my take on "What Happened?" regarding the 2024 election, please go to:

- "What Happened? – Part 1" - <https://tresser.substack.com/p/what-happened>
- "What Happened? – Part 2" - <https://tresser.substack.com/p/what-happened-part-2>
- "America's Nonprofit Sector – Stop Whining!" - <https://tresser.substack.com/p/amerucas-nonprofit-sector-stop-whining>
- "America's Nonprofit Sector Documents Its Own Powerlessness" - <https://tresser.substack.com/p/americas-nonprofit-sector-documents>

And here is my suggestion for fighting back, from The Nonprofit Quarterly -> www.tinyurl.com/TT-NPQ-What-Now. I call this Project 100K and I am challenging our sector to field 100,000 candidates for local office in 2026 and 2028 – candidates who are servant leaders who will fight for human rights, science, justice, equity, peace, and creativity. Are you ready to fight back?

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Get Tom's book on the No Games Chicago campaign @ www.tinyurl.com/Get-NGC-book