



THE NEW POPULIST MOVEMENT

# Organizing To Take Back America

By ROGER HICKEY

Co-Director, Campaign for America's Future

**CAMPAIGN** FOR **AMERICA'S FUTURE**  
[OurFuture.org](http://OurFuture.org)

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

The material in this book originally appeared on [OurFuture.org](http://OurFuture.org) and on The Huffington Post on March 17, 2014. Roger Hickey, co-director of the Campaign for America's Future, offers 12 key elements of a "new progressive populist movement" that is aiming to break the political stalemate in Washington exacerbated by the rise of "tea-party" conservatism. From fast-food workers striking for higher wages to members of Congress presenting an alternative to the austerity federal budgets of the past four years, this movement has drawn hundreds of thousands of organizers and activists into a network of fighters for changes that will make the American economy once again work for working people.

**Roger Hickey** is co-director of the Campaign for America's Future. He was also one of the founders of Health Care for America Now!, a coalition of more than 1,000 national and local organizations united to achieve quality affordable health care for all. He was also one of the leaders of the successful campaign to stop the privatization of Social Security, called Americans United to Protect Social Security. Hickey was a founder and Communications Director of the Economic Policy Institute, a Washington think tank that looks at economics from the point of view of working Americans. He was also a founder of the Public Media Center in San Francisco. A graduate of the University of Virginia, Hickey began his career in the 1960s as an organizer for the Virginia Civil Rights Committee.



**The Campaign for America's Future** is a center for ideas and action founded in 1996 that works to build an enduring majority for progressive change, focused on America's kitchen-table priorities – good jobs, a sustainable economy and lifelong financial security. The Campaign advances a progressive economic agenda and a vision of the future that works for all, not simply the few.

**A** new progressive populist movement is rising up in the United States. Inspired by an expansive vision of greater economic opportunity for all Americans, this new movement is also fueled by anger over politicians' broken promises. After decades of recurring economic crisis, which now seems systemic and permanent, millions of Americans have come to realize that much of our democratic system is now owned by moneyed elites that use their power to resist real change and to manipulate the economy for their own financial gain.

Even the mass media know something big is going on. At the end of November, a Washington Post headline announced "[More liberal, populist movement emerging ahead of 2016 elections](#)." The New York Times, in [a September article](#) reporting on the new progressive insurgency, cited the excitement generated by Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren and the new populist mayor of New York, Bill de Blasio. These and other media reports have been based on important new populist victories that represent the tip of a very large iceberg:

- Low-wage workers and their allies have filled the streets of America's major cities, demanding a living wage and the right to bargain for wages and benefits. Their basic demand, echoed now by political leaders, is that full-time work should pay enough to keep a family out of poverty.
- The cry of "break up the big banks" is now heard from protests at bank shareholder meetings to the halls of Congress. Many of the groups who worked to pass the Dodd-Frank bill have joined with housing advocates and others to demand Wall Street prosecutions – and real bank reform championed by Ohio Sen. Sherrod Brown and by Sen. Warren.
- Lawrence Summers, President Obama's top choice for Chair of the Federal Reserve, was stopped from getting that important job by a coalition of civic activists, including women and financial reform groups. Their favorite, Janet Yellen, was appointed instead.
- The national debate on the future of Social Security has been flipped – from "stop cutting benefits" to "expand Social Security." Activists got Iowa Sen. Tom Harkin to introduce a bill with Sen. Brown to expand benefits. Sen. Warren helped achieve critical mass. Conservative "Third Way" operatives attacked, but actual Third Way members of Congress denounced their own group – and several actually embraced Social Security expansion. And after grassroots pressure, President Obama withdrew his plan to cut Social Security benefits.

Political reporters have tended to frame the New Populism as either a challenge to President Obama or as an agenda and constituency for whoever might run against Hillary Clinton. But hard experience has taught us we need to build an independent force that can fight the big corporate interests and shape a positive agenda for all politicians who claim to be for progressive change.

To be clear, this new movement is still coming together, most visible politically in the grassroots campaigns to raise the minimum wage and extend unemployment insurance. It is still too early to know whether the New Populist agenda for change will be embraced by Democrats trying to win back the House and keep the Senate in the 2014 elections, especially since far too many Democrats, including the president, have trapped themselves into claiming the economy is on the mend, when most voters think things are still pretty bad. But politicians wondering what works with the voters should go to the new website [PopulistMajority.org](http://PopulistMajority.org).

Here is a description of ongoing organizing around 12 big elements of the emerging New Populist agenda. All this activity is not completely coordinated, but it is very real, involving hundreds of thousands of organizers who get up every morning and reach out to their neighbors and networks to fight for this economic change agenda, and to challenge the interests that have rigged the economic system. And many millions more share the vision of an economic system that works for the majority of Americans. As you can see, the New Populism is on the move.

## **1. Revive Sustainable Economic Growth, Creating Jobs for All**

In the turbulent months after the economic collapse, the rallying cry was jobs. [Grassroots citizen organizations](#) and think tanks agitated publicly for [a big, bold economic recovery program](#) based on investing in getting Americans back to work. This organizing helped build momentum to pass the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) in February 2009. Citizen and labor groups held demonstrations at aging bridges and schools in hundreds of communities, making the point that America has lots of needs for investments that would put people to work immediately, while making our economy more productive for the long term.

The Recovery Act succeeded in stopping America's plunge into a deep recession, but should have been seen as only a first step toward economic revival. Tragically, President Obama failed to mobilize the people around a demand for the continuing stimulus investment necessary to sustain the recovery after such a profound recession. As a result, voters in the 2010 congressional elections, most of whom were still discouraged about the lack of jobs, blamed Democrats and sent a new Republican majority to the House.

On March 12, the [Congressional Progressive Caucus](#) – led by 70 members of Congress and backed by hundreds of citizen groups – released their new [Better Off Budget](#). For the fourth time in four years, they are demonstrating the level of investment America should be making in order to revive growth. If Congress had passed the CPC's first budget, the economy would have grown more robustly and



consistently, unemployment would have come down dramatically, wages and opportunity would have increased, and the deficit would have been even lower. The Economic Policy Institute [finds](#) it would create 9 million jobs by 2017.

Many progressive organizations are joining to promote the Progressive Caucus budget. They will remind voters that radical conservative austerity killed jobs, and conservatives have obstructed every major investment and growth plan. And many groups will also organize to ask candidates for Congress what they would do to create enough jobs for all Americans who want to work.

## **2. Invest in America's Infrastructure and in New Jobs for the 21st Century**

Immediate action to stimulate growth and achieve full employment is the number one priority of most Americans. But when we ask the experts and elected officials what will drive long-term job creation, too many turn pessimistic, mumbling warnings about globalization, the rise of technology, and the failure of the U.S. education system. We know from bitter experience that conservative “growth plans” – tax cuts, austerity and deregulation – don’t work. They lead only to speculative booms, growing inequality and then financial collapse.

America’s future depends on the growing movement demanding productive public investment in the new industries, energy technologies, research, and the education systems America will need to drive a new generation of economic growth and good jobs. The best parts of the Obama stimulus made a start at creating new industries, such as advanced batteries and high-speed rail, and helped existing industries, such as photovoltaics and wind energy. Powerful coalitions, such as the [Apollo Alliance](#) and the [Blue-Green Alliance](#) have united environmentalists, unions, mayors and governors with business leaders to push for a new development strategy for America that retools our infrastructure (including advanced and open Internet) and energy systems in a way that rebuilds our cities and creates the next several generations of jobs, while stimulating new private industries.

Meanwhile, groups like the [Alliance for American Manufacturing](#) and [Citizens’ Trade Campaign](#) have not only mobilized grassroots opposition to NAFTA-style trade deals, which undermine U.S. jobs and sovereignty, but they are building public support for an agenda that would strengthen manufacturing in the U.S. while raising labor and environmental standards around the world.

Again, it is the ultra-ideological conservatives, whose only tools are cutting taxes for the wealthy and corporations, who stand in the way of this new nation-building movement. Polling shows that most Americans remember when public investment in highways and financing for suburban homes drove private-sector prosperity – and public investments in the space program helped America’s private-sector domination in computers and advanced technology systems.

Younger people, who may not know that history, are strongly committed to society-shaping investments in alternative energy and conservation – and they are delighted to find out about America’s long history of federal aid to education, including our creation of land-grant universities, which once made college virtually free.

### **3. Make Work Pay – and Fight to Reduce Inequality in America**

Across America over the past two years, underpaid fast-food workers have bravely engaged in rolling strikes to launch a protest movement with a simple compelling goal: no American who works full time should raise a family in poverty. Workers at OUR Walmart (Organization United for Respect at Walmart) have been publicly demanding justice and fair pay for low-wage employees at the world’s second-largest corporation. And a massive nationwide organizing campaign is pressuring Congress to increase the minimum wage to \$10.10 an hour and to index it to inflation.

These brave organizers played an important role in convincing President Obama to declare in December 2013 that “economic inequality is the defining challenge of our time” and that the growing gap between the nation’s rich and poor poses “a fundamental threat to the American dream.”

Of course, reversing economic inequality and reviving the dream require major economic changes, from empowering workers to form unions to building a full-employment economy that forces employers to raise wages and benefits in order to get good workers. What unites all these efforts is the dawning society-wide realization that an economy dominated by inequality and low-wage jobs can never produce opportunity, even for the business classes. The job of the New Populist movement is to demand action that achieves wide-spread prosperity.

### **4. If The Rising American Electorate Succeeds, America Succeeds**

The face of America is changing: African Americans, Hispanic Americans, women and young people all depend on a robust economy to achieve their economic goals and to support their families. But all of these groups have suffered from discrimination in the workforce that limits the ability of many to get good jobs, earn a living wage, or fully contribute to the economy. In their demands for an economy that works for all of us, representing the "rising American electorate," they represent a powerful and growing populist force.

- **When Women Succeed, America Succeeds.** House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi has been working with many groups to put together "[An Economic Agenda for Women and Families](#)." It outlines an economic plan for [pay equity](#), [work and family balance](#) and [child care](#). At a time when modern

families get nothing but moralistic lectures and dangerous restrictions on choice from conservatives, most women are demanding leadership that can help them get a job with equal pay, raise their families, and count on a secure retirement. And women are making these issues the drivers of elections and legislation.

- **An America That Works for All Is a More Prosperous America.** Angela Glover Blackwell of PolicyLink has [calculated](#) that closing the black-white income gap in America would add over a half-trillion dollars to the national gross domestic product (GDP) — more than the entire economic output of North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and 43 other states. The Congressional Budget Office [estimated](#) that comprehensive immigration reform would boost GDP in the U.S. by 3.3 percent by 2023, an increase of \$700 billion. More than half of all babies born today are of color, and by 2043 we will be a majority people-of-color nation. In “[All-In Nation](#)” Blackwell describes how strong communities of color are critical to America’s economic future and lays out a comprehensive policy agenda to build an equitable economy where everyone, including fast-growing communities of color, can participate and thrive.
- **A Bad Start on Jobs for Young People Means a Bad Future for America.** Throughout the deepest recession and slowest recovery since World War II, young people of the “millennial generation” aged 18 to 34 have now seen double-digit unemployment rates for almost six years. The group known as [The Young Invincibles](#) calculated the losses this high unemployment has imposed on young people and the economy as a whole: \$8.9 billion per year. [Opportunity Nation](#) estimates that 5.8 million young adults are not working nor in school. [The Young Invincibles](#) have called for the creation of 500,000 national service jobs to provide employment for young Americans. They have also called for major reforms to the student loan program that now burdens millions of young people with debt when they graduate. The Roosevelt Campus Network’s [Budget for Millennial America](#) calls for making the essential investments in education, health care, infrastructure and green energy needed to ensure a robust 21st-century economy. The plan reflects the views of a cross-section of some 3,000 millennials.

## **5. Guarantee a High Quality Public Education For All**

Since America's inception, our people and our leaders have held high the belief that a system of free and public education is essential for our whole society to prosper and remain democratic.

But in recent decades, our policymakers have imposed an ugly experiment on the nation’s schoolchildren, their parents and their teachers: enforcing standardization of education and mandating sustained and prolonged testing of students throughout their learning years. Education is also being privatized at all levels, reducing democratic control of schools. And now most college students are

forced to carry unconscionable levels of debt, constricting access to those willing to work for years just to pay off their student loans.

Now, Americans across the nation are building a movement for change – an [Education Spring](#). Over 35,000 people have joined 40 prominent leaders in signing the "[Education Declaration to Rebuild America](#)," and grassroots protests are spreading that aim to bolster public education, from preschool through college levels, and expand learning opportunities for students of all ages.

This new movement supports the opportunity to learn, not the requirement to test. It challenges the ideologues now in charge of education in America. It emphasizes big ideas, such as investing in rebuilding schools to put people to work and strengthening the hand of good teachers in the educational system. It also sets large goals, such as universal preschool and establishing at least one public university system in each state in which tuition is nearly free.

## **6. Strengthen and Expand Social Security. And Fight for Health Care for All**

For decades now, conservatives have tried to privatize and cut funding for the major institutions of America's social insurance system: Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. And each time, Americans have fought back – because these programs are very popular. We turned President Clinton away from his dalliance with partial privatization of Social Security - and then we stopped President George W. Bush dead in his tracks when he tried to make real privatization the centerpiece of his second term.

With every fight, [the pro-social insurance movement grew](#) - led by seniors and unions, the groups who got those programs passed in the first place.

Organizations representing women and African Americans and Hispanics reminded their constituencies how important Social Security is to their economic security. And activist young people, now burdened by student loans and a lousy job market, came to realize the value of retirement and health care systems they could count on.

Our [latest victory](#) came from pressuring the President to take out of his budget the so-called Chained CPI cuts, which would have affected Social Security and many other programs. Now progressives and populists are free, in the run-up to the midterm congressional elections, to campaign as strong defenders of Social Security, Medicare (without means-testing) and Medicaid. Today's new populist message – that we should expand, not cut social insurance programs – is finding real traction in a period when lots of people don't have employer pensions and don't expect to have much in the way of retirement savings. We saw how powerful this idea is when the conservative Third Way attacked it – and their congressional members denounced Third Way and [joined progressives](#) in supporting the idea.



We've managed to prevent cuts to Medicaid because President Obama made it integral to his health care plan, however it is on the chopping block in states where Governors are rejecting Obamacare. So activists are working to get all states to expand Medicaid and to create health exchanges. Simultaneously, we are pushing reforms to control costs by reducing the power of the drug and insurance industries. And the next big populist fight will be for a single-payer health system, based on Medicare, that will guarantee quality health care for all.

The conservative message is America can't afford even our meager level of social insurance. Our answer is that "America is not broke." We should tax the wealthy and corporations in order to reduce deficits and finance our public investment needs. If we get our economy growing – and if we fix our broken and costly health care system – Americans can afford decent retirement and good health care for today's retirees and for baby boomers, Gen-Xers and millennials. That's a powerful coalition.

## **7. Make the Rich and Corporations Pay Their Fair Share**

Michael Moore had a simple response when Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker tried to justify his cuts to public wages and labor rights. He declared: "America and Wisconsin are not broke. Contrary to what those in power would like you to believe so that you'll give up your pension, cut your wages, and settle for the life your great-grandparents had, America is not broke. Not by a long shot. The country is awash in wealth and cash. It's just that it's not in your hands. It has been transferred, in the greatest heist in history, from the workers and consumers to the banks and the portfolios of the uber-rich."

The conservative solution for everything has been tax cuts for the rich and big corporations. When President George W. Bush inherited a large federal budget surplus from President Clinton, he cut taxes across-the-board, [reducing top individual income tax rates and taxes on dividends and capital gains](#), giving a massive windfall to the wealthy – and as a result, funds that might have supported public investment were wasted.

In early 2012, the Bush tax cuts were allowed to expire for everyone making more than \$450,000 a year, requiring the top 1 percent of Americans to pay an amount closer to their fair share of taxes. That victory will raise [\\$620 billion over 10 years](#). This first major new tax increase in a generation was successful because of grassroots pressure from around the country – organized by [Americans for Tax Fairness](#) – representing the joined efforts of more than [400 national and state-based organizations](#).

But today big business is pushing for "reform" of corporate taxes that would actually cut taxes for giant corporations, help them escape taxes abroad, and would give America not one additional corporate tax dollar for deficit reduction or needed public investment. This is coming from the same people who have been

telling us America is broke and that we need to cut important programs to balance the budget. Get ready for a fight – with a majority on our side. In a [poll by Hart Research](#), 64 percent of voters said the “richest 2 percent should be paying more in taxes” and 64 percent said “large corporations should be paying more in taxes.”

## **8. Stop Bad Trade Deals, and Balance Trade Based on Global Labor Rights**

Thanks to effective organizing by an array of citizen groups and a bipartisan group of legislators, the latest corporate-backed mega trade deal, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) has been stalled in Congress and doesn't stand much of a chance of passing. Proponents of the TPP can't pass the fast-track trade authority they need to railroad the TPP through Congress.

Ever since passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) trade deal and the push for China to join the World Trade Organization, Americans have become more and more skeptical about the outcomes of “free trade” treaties. They know we have lost millions of jobs to Mexico and China and even lower-wage countries. The deals may have been good for some corporations, but not for working Americans.

Groups like the [Alliance for American Manufacturing](#) and [Citizens' Trade Campaign](#) have not only mobilized grassroots opposition to NAFTA-style trade deals which undermine U.S. jobs and sovereignty, they are building public support for an agenda that would strengthen manufacturing in the U.S. while raising labor and environmental standards around the world. This is another arena in which a new populist coalition is growing so strong that America's trade and manufacturing policies will eventually be determined by the American public and not just the international elite.

In the meantime, citizen groups have rallied around new policies designed to actually bring down the U.S. trade deficit – like Sen. Sherrod Brown's [bi-partisan bill](#) designed to force countries like China to quit manipulating their currency to place U.S. exports at a disadvantage. The Economic Policy Institute has [estimated](#) that ending currency manipulation would create up to 4.7 million jobs over three years. And organizers are using this [interactive map](#) produced by EPI to show the positive impact of real anti-trade-deficit policies in every state in the union.

## **9. Reform the Financial System to Safely Serve the Productive Economy**

Financial deregulation allowed greed and fraud to run rampant on Wall Street. That fueled a financial crisis that left millions of homes underwater and millions of Americans jobless while losing trillions of dollars from the national economy.

Meanwhile, the financial institutions whose greed had created the crisis were deemed "too big to fail," and they were bailed out.

Many groups worked hard to pass the Dodd-Frank financial reforms after the crisis. While a first step, they are not nearly enough. Citizen groups and experts are warning: The banks at the epicenter of the crisis are larger and more concentrated than ever. Criminal fraud has gone unpunished. A revolving door between Wall Street and Washington has weakened government's ability to monitor our banking system, punish fraud and prevent future crises.

Activist groups, in collaboration with leaders like Sen. Elizabeth Warren, are working to break up the too-big-to-fail banks and restore the Glass-Steagall law that separated consumer banking from high-risk trading. Bipartisan proposals demand an end to the 'hidden subsidy' that gives American mega-banks an unfair advantage, allowing them to dominate the financial system. Groups like the [Home Defenders League](#) and [National People's Action](#) are fighting for the rights of defrauded homeowners and demanding a fairer deal from mortgage-mishandling bankers. The push for a financial transaction tax is growing, to pay for the damage Wall Street has done and to discourage ultra-high-speed mass transactions that put the economic system at risk. The rallying cry is simple: Banking should be boring again - and serve the real economy.

## **10. Invest in The Energy Technologies That Drive a Sustainable Economy**

Environmental groups have educated America: The energy system created by the major oil companies is not only wasteful and costly, it threatens the climate of the earth and all of us who live here. The great insight of labor-led groups like the [Apollo Alliance](#) and the [Blue-Green Alliance](#) is that, while we must stop subsidizing carbon pollution, we must also invest in new energy technologies that are clean and sustainable, so they can put Americans to work building the basis of future generations of good jobs – in both public and private sectors – and in regions hard hit by the transition away from fossil fuels.

Citizen-led movements, in cities and in rural areas, have learned the painful lesson that the effects of climate change can be devastating. They are leading the fight to make sure the basic systems we use every day – our transportation, communications, energy transmission, clean water, rail and transit systems – are made modern and resilient so that whole communities are not repeatedly threatened.

Thanks to the \$90 billion in public investment during President Obama's first term, America briefly led the world in clean energy investment, with \$48.1 billion in 2011. But as the "stimulus" ended, so did our clean energy leadership. The following year China returned to the top spot as American investment fell to \$35.6 billion.

America must lead again, and return to the levels of investment found in the Recovery Act. We should adopt the [Blue-Green Alliance Jobs21](#) green jobs plan, which includes a multi-year transportation infrastructure bill, a national renewable electricity standard, long-term renewable energy production and investment tax credits, and a "green bank" providing public seed money to attract private investment for clean energy projects.

## **11. Reduce the Military Budget and Invest at Home**

Barack Obama won the Democratic nomination and was elected president because the movement to end the Iraq War came to represent the majority of Americans who were weary of foreign adventures and wanted those resources invested here at home. Today, the president is winding down operations in Afghanistan. America's military should be reduced by cutting [costly and wasteful weapons systems](#) instead of wages and benefits for service members and veterans.

Although the Secretary of Defense has begun to cut spending, and budget caps set by Congress are supposed to be bringing down military spending, we need to do much more. Budget gimmicks – like the Overseas Contingency Operations account designed to fund the Afghanistan and Iraq and counterterrorism activities – are now being used to shelter unrelated spending from cuts imposed by Congress. More than 50 organizations representing labor, environmental, civil rights, equality and human needs groups have written to Congress to protest. Their goal is to build a powerful force to demand a change in priorities.

The threats that endanger our security are increasingly less military and more commercial and environmental. Our security priorities should reflect this reality. We must bring to an end our effort to police the world, and we should invest in building a strong economy at home. We should do far more to lift the half of the world that lives on less than \$2 a day than to protect the 85 billionaires who have as much wealth as that half. We should be devoted to accelerating nuclear disarmament as a first step toward creating conflict- and military-free zones across the world. We have helped to end the wars; now Americans want the country focused on building shared prosperity.

## **12. Strengthen Democracy**

As big money has come to dominate our politics, inequality has grown even more extreme. As the 1 percent were allowed to use their wealth to control the political system, the politicians gave them what they want: the ability to rig the rules to help the rich get even richer. Since the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision, we have seen a flood of unregulated money into politics from corporations and the wealthy. The torrent has been so powerful that, even before elections, candidates of both parties often agree to protect the privileges, subsidies and inside deals that add to the inequality.



Our democracy is under siege. Money is not speech and corporations are not people. Yet the power and influence of ideologically driven money in politics and corporate influence is unprecedented.

Citizen outrage is growing. [The Democracy Initiative](#), launched in 2013, seeks to restore the core principle of political equality. It is backed by more than 50 labor, civil rights, voting rights, environmental, good government and other organizations, all committed to building a movement to halt the corrupting influence of corporate money in politics.

Already, the groups have flexed their muscles, winning the first major reform in Senate rules that had allowed a small minority to obstruct deliberation and block action on legislation drafted to address the critical challenges facing our nation. Most of those same groups have also helped to introduce the [Government By the People Act](#), written by Maryland Rep. John Sarbanes, to give everyday Americans a bigger voice in the political process by allowing candidates for Congress to run competitive campaigns by relying on small donations from people back home.

If voting is the sacrament of democracy, radical conservatives have blasphemed grievously by acting to suppress voting in ways that we haven't seen since the Jim Crow era. Civil rights groups are mobilizing to force Congress to strengthen the Voting Rights Act in the wake of bad Supreme Court decisions. Also, in many states a multiracial civil rights movement has emerged – like the [Moral Mondays movement](#) in North Carolina – to reestablish the right to vote and to link that right to the important economic priorities citizens want their government to address.

Americans have gone through tough times in recent years, and they know the economic problems we face have been caused or made worse by the rich and corporations seeking to rig the rules for their benefit. They hate the idea that the economic solutions that could help average families have been thwarted by an unfair political system where only the rich have a voice. So a populist campaign for economic change must also be a campaign to protect and extend democracy.

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**OurFuture.org**

1825 K Street NW • Suite 400 • Washington DC 20006 • 202 955-5665 • [info@ourfuture.org](mailto:info@ourfuture.org)