

Winning a People-Powered Future

A snapshot of Elizabeth Wilkins's recent *Democracy Journal* essay

The United States is at a crossroads. Policymakers promised that tax cuts would trickle down, deregulation would unleash growth, and shareholder interests were the nation's interests. They even claimed that starving government of capacity was in the public interest. None of this proved true and only fueled disillusionment. In this populist moment, we find ourselves in a battle of ideas for what comes next: A dangerously coherent version of Donald Trump's authoritarian nostalgia or a forward-looking vision of governance that can actually create the economy people want.

To meet this moment, we must cocreate our policies with the public, listening to their biggest needs and aspirations and giving them agency in the outcome. This means avoiding the trap of detaching our policies from the kind of people-first organizing and agenda-setting that can build trust.

We also have to flip our risk profile. Instead of cautiously coloring inside the lines to preserve institutional legitimacy, we need to use every available tool to act boldly and speak clearly. Our solutions must be felt immediately by the people demanding them, as FDR's example showed us. To lead the country out of our own harrowing times, we need to think just as big about what it takes to create a good life.

→ Read the essay: [Winning a People-Powered Future](#)

A "Good Life" Agenda: Four Pillars for a Democratic Economy

1. Rein in corporate power. Concentrated wealth and corporate dominance constrain opportunity, leaving families squeezed by higher prices and fewer choices. A fair economy means curbing monopoly power and financialization and making markets work for people.

Proof in action: At the Federal Trade Commission, policymakers [banned noncompete clauses](#) after workers spoke up about how these contracts trapped them in abusive jobs. By centering public input, the agency proposed a rule restoring freedom for 30 million workers to change jobs, start businesses, and innovate. The rule is being challenged in court, but its import is clear: People-centered policymaking can reset the balance of power.

2. Build worker power and agency. Workers deserve more than just jobs. They need dignity, stability, and the ability to provide for their families. That means more money in people's pockets through stronger wage and overtime laws, predictable hours, and the right to organize. We must also ensure that new technologies serve people, not the other way around. Technological productivity gains should translate into shorter workweeks and more time with loved ones, not concentrated profits for executives.

Proof in action: The excluded workers campaign in New York [won \\$2.1 billion](#) for people left out of pandemic relief. Organizers then cowrote the program's rules, ensuring funds reached those most in need.

3. Create economic security for all. Basic needs like care, retirement, and health should be treated as collective commitments, not individual risks. We need robust public systems so families can plan their lives with confidence.

Proof in action: Social Security has faced repeated efforts to privatize and financialize it. [Strengthening and modernizing](#) the program would guarantee retirement security and restore confidence in government.

4. Design truly democratic institutions. Disinvestment and neglect have hollowed out our government for decades, undermining trust and fueling disillusionment. Building capacity for the kind of government people want means creating institutions that are nimbler, more risk tolerant, and outcome-oriented to deliver policy that shifts power to people.

Proof in action: In Washington, DC, the attorney general's office did more than file lawsuits against slumlords. They brought tenant groups to the table and used legal leverage to [forge lasting affordable housing solutions](#) like ensuring nonprofit buyers replaced bad actors in the market.

Conclusion

The stakes going forward are high. Yet the contest ahead is about more than policy—it is about whether people feel powerless in their workplaces and communities or empowered to shape their lives. The current reality demands boldness: solutions people can feel in their daily lives and institutions that restore trust in democracy.



About The Roosevelt Institute

The Roosevelt Institute is a think tank, a student network, and the nonprofit partner to the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum that, together, are learning from the past and working to redefine the future of the American economy. Focusing on corporate and public power, labor and wages, and the economics of race and gender inequality, the Roosevelt Institute unifies experts, invests in young leaders, and advances progressive policies that bring the legacy of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt into the 21st century.