

The Anti-Government Echo Chamber

Introduction



“The emancipation of belief is the most formidable tasks of reform and the one on which all else depends.”

– John Kenneth Galbraith

“The power of the [corporation] depends on instilling the belief that any public or private action that serves its purposes also serves the purpose of the public at large.”

– John Kenneth Galbraith

“The nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I’m from the Government, and I’m here to help.”

– President Ronald Reagan

“The folks who run Koch [Industries] are very clear. They would love to have government just get out of the way and allow companies to compete, whether in their particular sectors or other sectors. They are true believers in small government.”

– Congressional candidate Mike Pompeo when asked if [he was influenced by Koch Industries](#), his largest donor.

“Expansive government undermines the moral character that is necessary to civil society.”

– [Cato Institute 2017 Handbook for Policymakers](#)

Anti-government sentiment by corporations and conservative intellectuals isn’t new. In 1914, three years after the Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire killed 145 women and girls, real estate interests lobbied against new building safety codes. “The experience of the past proves conclusively that the best government is the least possible government, that the unfettered initiative of the individual is the force that makes a country great,” said Laurence McGuire, chairman of the Real Estate Board of New York.

But since the 1960’s (particularly after Barry Goldwater’s presidential campaign), anti-government rhetoric has gotten clearer, more consistent, and has come from diverse right-wing voices, from white supremacists to the religious right. It’s been weaponized to oppose a wide range of policies and programs, from education to ensuring civil rights. The attack on government is often selective—focused on the safety net and public services we all rely upon but silent on tax cuts, subsidies and other benefits for industry.

Why this brief?

Lack of trust in government a defining feature of American politics—among progressives, moderates and conservatives. It is a result of a variety of factors but mostly driven by forces who see government as an impediment to unregulated market capitalism. These forces have effectively taken advantage of real failures of government action while steadily capturing control of public institutions and popular conventional wisdom that has led to more failure and greater distrust.

These attitudes obscure many successes of public policy and action. A steady stream of progressive organizing led to the Clean Air Act, OSHA, Safe Drugs, Social Security, ADA, auto safety—things many of us now take for granted. Not everyone saw it as progress. Conservatives, corporations and ideologues were unhappy about health and safety rules, higher taxes and other laws that “restricted the free market.” They wanted to go back to a winner take all society where they are the winners.

While attacking public institutions, they had their sights set on the idea of government. Free-market ideologues had a more basic goal: to fundamentally redefine our relationship with government so that instead of being citizens with right and responsibilities we become individual consumers of public services who get only what we can pay for.

For a more detailed analysis of the 40-year assault on government, read [“Dismantling Democracy: The forty-year attack on government, and the long game for the common good”](#) by In the Public Interest executive director, Donald Cohen.

This brief pulls together examples of how corporate figures, right-wing organizations and conservative politicians talk about the role of government—or the lack thereof—in American life. What emerges is a sobering reality: Attacking government, perhaps more than any other idea or issue, has unified right-wing forces. While not the focus of this document, it’s important to note the huge amounts of corporate funding that has fueled many of these forces, organizations and efforts. As just one example, the tobacco industry created the “Get Government Off Our Back” coalition in 1994 to fight federal regulation of tobacco.

Call to Action: A pro-public echo chamber

We are publishing this brief as call to action to progressive leaders, thinkers, strategists, organizations, organizers and activists. Virtually every policy, program and issue we focus on relies on using the powers and institutions of government to create a fairer, healthier and safer country and world. Yet, progressives rarely talk about government successes and progress except when under attack. The language we use is often tinged with anti-government attitudes. Conservatives have waged a long-term campaign to discredit government while progressives have focused on specific issues and campaigns and remained silent on the ideas that unites those issues.

This brief is not a prescription of particular messages or narratives. There are many organizations doing work to that end. This is about getting clear about the idea of government—that it is the only institution capable of ensuring that the public goods we all rely upon are available to everyone. And about creating our own pro-public echo chamber until that idea becomes a new popular conventional wisdom and become a governing reality.

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The ideological battle

Right-wing economists, politicians, and public thinkers have laid the ideological groundwork for decades with a steady drumbeat of general anti-government ideas, statements and cynical attacks.



*"The most important change which extensive **government** control produces is psychological change, an alteration of the character of people."*

– Frederick Hayek in "The Road to Serfdom" (1956)

*"A **government** big enough to give you everything you want is big enough to take everything."*

– Barry Goldwater (1964)

*"As **government** expands, liberty contracts."*

– Ronald Reagan (1989)

*"'Small **government**' is simply code for 'no more assistance to poor people, particularly poor people of color.'"*

– Lee Attwater, Reagan advisor (1981)

*"The era of big **government** is over."*

– Bill Clinton (1996)

*"I'm not in favor of abolishing the **government**. I just want to shrink it down to the size where we can drown it in the bathtub."*

– Grover Norquist, Republican strategist

An infrastructure of conservative and libertarian think tanks and advocacy organizations demonstrates extraordinary consistency and alignment on their opposition to government. Here are just a few:



The Heritage Foundation: ...*formulate and promote conservative public policies on the principles of free enterprise, limited **government**, individual freedom, traditional American values, and a strong national defense.*

Reason Foundation: ...*advancing the values of choice, individual freedom and limited **government**.*

Americans for Prosperity: ...*protect the American Dream by fighting each day for lower taxes, less **government** regulation and economic prosperity for all.*

Cato Institute: ...*dedicated to the principles of individual liberty, limited **government**, free markets, and peace.*

Mackinac Center (State Policy Network member): ...*advances the principles of free markets and limited **government**. Through our research and education programs, we challenge **government** overreach and advocate for free-market approaches to public policy that free people to realize their potential and their dreams.*

Maclver Institute (SPN member): ...*promotes free markets, individual freedom, personal responsibility and limited **government**.*

Goldwater Institute: ...*advancing the principles of limited **government**, economic freedom, and individual liberty,*

The issues

Attacks on government are used in every public good and progressive issue—both as an effective campaign message and to continue to steadily increase public discontent with government over the long term.

Public education

In 1955, libertarian economist Milton Friedman of the University of Chicago published “The Role of **Government** in Education.” Friedman’s called for a system of government-financed vouchers to replace “**government schools**,” as he called them, was grounded in his free market beliefs.

Since then conservatives have consistently used the term “government schools” to tarnish public education. According to [Katherine Stewart](#), author of *The Good News Club: The Christian Right’s Stealth Assault on America’s Children*, “they want you to think of an alien force, and not an expression of democratic purpose. And when they say ‘freedom,’ they mean freedom from democracy itself.”



*“I’ve used the word public schools a fair bit [but] I am beginning to change my own terminology. I would encourage you to either improve on mine or adopt it. ‘Public schools’ is such a misnomer today that I really hate to use that. I’ve begun to use the word ‘**government schools**’ or ‘**government-run-schools**’ to describe what we used to call public schools because it’s a better descriptor of in fact what they are. Because the public school creates this aura that if anyone walks in off the street into a quote unquote public school they would be welcome.”*

– [Dick DeVos, billionaire \(2002\)](#)



*“They’re **government** schools, not public schools. They’re owned by the **government**, located on **government** property, staffed by **government** employees, and funded with money the **government** seizes from taxpayers. And, like most things **government**, they are complete disasters.”*

– [Neil Boortz, conservative pundit \(2009\)](#)

*“There is no policy more in need of urgent change than **our government-run** education monopoly”*

– Donald Trump (2016)

*“Until we can get **government** entirely out of education, we’ll have to keep fighting to preserve and expand our ability to choose what’s right for our kids.”*

– Reason Foundation (2018)

*“It’s school choice week! What’s that? It’s a week about giving parents and kids a choice of schools, so they aren’t stuck in failing, **government-run** schools.”*

– [John Stoessel, Reason Foundation \(2018\)](#)

*“They play to your fear, **government** plays to your fear. Which is why you wonder, historically, you’ve got this up and down in the political cycle. It’s appealing when the **government** says ‘well we’re going to take money from them, and we’re going to give it to you. And that’s going to take away a lot of your fear. And if you put your faith, your hope, your trust in us, then we’re going to make sure that your healthcare is taken care of, your retirement is taken care of, your kids are taken care of.’ I mean if you listen to socialists at the ultimate level, they want free healthcare, free daycare, free schools—how’re those **government** schools doing?”*

– Sean Hannity (2019)

*“For too long, countless American children have been trapped in failing **government** schools.”*

– Donald Trump (2020)

Taxes that fund public services

Anti-tax leaders and organizations have been key [vehicles](#) for ginning up anti-**government** sentiments. Why give the **government** money when all they do is waste it? Anti-government and “no new taxes” messages are regularly deployed to defeat revenue and bond measures across the country. There are too many examples to list. A thorough analysis is needed to illuminate the scope and impact of anti-government rhetoric and attitudes that have been used to defeat tax measures.

For example, Proposition CC on the November 2019 ballot in Colorado would’ve started to limit the impacts of the state’s Taxpayer Bill of Rights (TABOR), which reduces public resources to address the needs of residents. The opponents’ [arguments](#) allow a real-time example:



*“You can’t say you’re free if the **government** can take away everything you have without your permission.”*

– [Doug Bruce, landlord \(2017\)](#)

*“I think first and foremost it’s important to remind everybody that’s taxpayer money, that’s not **government** money.”*

– [Jesse Mallory, Americans for Prosperity \(2019\)](#)

*“There is no guarantee where Prop CC money will actually be spent. Don’t give up your TABOR tax refunds to create a slush fund for state **government!**”*

– [Americans for Prosperity \(2019\)](#)



"Top 3 reasons to vote NO on Prop CC:

- 1. It's a blank check to the **government**.*
- 2. It's a tax increase when the **government** keeps and spends more of your money.*
- 3. It would PERMANENTLY stop TABOR tax refunds."*

– [Americans for Prosperity \(2019\)](#)

In addition to defeating specific ballot measures, anti-tax rhetoric pervades political campaigns, conservative commentary and even commencement ceremonies.



*"**Big Government** has become an increasing factor in our lives. The tax revolt of the last few years has been far more than simply an effort to save the taxpayer's money. It has been also an effort to put a limit to the growth of big government."*

– Massachusetts Governor Edward King, Curry College Commencement Speech (1980)

"He voted against tax cuts and spending cuts and welfare reform and prisons. That's the record of a liberal, big-government Democrat."

– Republican Party campaign flyer for Republican candidate opposing Virginia Democratic state assembly member (1995)

*"But we have nothing to apologize for, and we don't think the **government** should have more of our profits ... We know we can spend our dollars more wisely, and in ways that benefit our communities and our country, than politicians can."*

– [Bernard Marcus, Home Depot co-founder, and John Catsimatidis, New York supermarket magnate \(2019\)](#)

Universal health care

Though [there is a long history](#) in [American politics](#) of [opponents](#) slandering proposals for universal health care as "socialized medicine." Before the 1990s, the term "**government**" was [rarely used](#) to define publicly financed health care programs. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and a concerted effort to weaken public support for **government** institutions, that changed and "**government** run" health care became the mantra of both industry and ideologues.

For example, the Coalition Against Socialized Medicine, a project of the American Conservative Union (funded by the Koch brothers) [opposes](#):

- Centralized **government-run** healthcare
- **Government** mandates that erode incentives for investments in medical research and development
- Elimination of private insurance, including employer-based coverage, which accounts for over 250 million insured individuals, and consolidation of all freestanding **government** health programs into one massive federal program"

Medicare



*"All of us can see what happens once you establish the precedent that the **government** can determine a man's working place and his working methods, determine his employment. From here it's a short step to all the rest of socialism, to determining his pay ... He will wait for the **government** to tell him where he will go to work and what he will do."*

– Ronald Reagan's anti-Medicare message for the American Medical Association (1961)

*"Will you resist the temptation to get a **government** handout for your community? Realize that the doctor's fight against socialized medicine is your fight. We can't socialize the doctors without socializing the patients. Recognize that **government** invasion of public power is eventually an assault upon your own business."*

– Ronald Reagan (1964)

*"We cannot stand idly by now, as the Nation is urged to embark on an ill-conceived adventure in **government medicine**, the end of which no one can see, and from which the patient is certain to be the ultimate sufferer."*

– Missouri Rep. Durward Hall (1965)

Clintoncare



*"This plan forces us to buy our insurance through new **mandatory government** health alliances..." (Louise) "Run by tens of thousands of bureaucrats..." (Harry) "Having choices we don't like is no choice at all..." (Louise) "They choose, we lose" (Together).*

– Health Insurance Association of America's (HIAA) "Harry and Louise" TV ads (1993)

*"What we don't do is let the **government run** our health care system through mandatory and monopolistic insurance purchasing schemes. That approach would take away your freedom of choice about health care..."*

– The Coalition for Health Insurance Choices 1993

Single payer/Medicare for all

The health insurance industry [ran ads](#) in California warning that Proposition 186, a 1994 statewide ballot initiative that would have created a state single payer system, would create "**government** run health care," a "new **government**-run bureaucracy," and a "**government** health care takeover."

Nurse: Believe me, we know health reform is critical...

Text on Screen: Jane Claire Walsh, R.N.

Nurse: ...but Proposition 186 isn't the reform we need. 186 will force most of us to give up our private health coverage and push us into a government run health bureaucracy controlled by an elected politician, not a doctor or nurse.

A document shown on the screen identified as a "Government Election" handbook is being flipped through.

Text on Screen: GOVERNMENT HEALTH CARE TAKEOVER
SOURCE: CA. BALLOT PAMPHLET

Text on Screen: HEALTH "CZAR" CONTROLS HEALTH CARE
SOURCE: CA. BALLOT PAMPHLET

Nurse: We need reform that guarantees everyone coverage, but this type of government takeover is bad medicine for California.

Announcer: California says "no" to government run health care.

Obamacare



*"[Hillary Clinton] want[s] to move toward **mandated government** medicine, socialized medicine."*
– Rudy Giuliani (2007)

*"Creating a **government-run** plan — in any form — to compete alongside the private sector for non-Medicare/Medicaid eligible individuals is unnecessary to achieve comprehensive reform and would have devastating consequences."*

– Scott Serota, Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association (2009)

*"Forcing free market plans to compete with these **government-run** programs would create an unlevel playing field and inevitably doom true competition..."*

– Senators Mitch McConnell, Orrin Hatch, Charles Grassley, Mike Enzi, and Judd Gregg (2009)

*"Yet research indicates that much of what Americans spend on medical care, through both **government** programs and a private sector heavily dominated by **government** interference, offers no benefit to patients."*

– [Cato Institute 2017 Handbook for Policymakers](#)

*"When listening to those advocating 'Medicare for All' it's good to be skeptical about their promises. As head of the agency that serves over 58 million Medicare beneficiaries, I deal first-hand with the challenges of **government** run healthcare."*

– Seema Verma, Administrator, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (2018)

*"But if we have learned anything from Obamacare, we know more **government** is not the answer to America's healthcare problem. More **government** is the problem."*

– Sen. Ted Cruz (2020)

Gun safety

Gun-rights advocates describe government as a totalitarian and use fear mongering to scare gun owners that the "government is coming to take away their guns."



*"For you, as an individual, when do you draw your saber? When do you say "Yes, I am willing to rise up and overthrow an oppressive, totalitarian **government**?" Is it when the **government** takes away your private business? Is it when the **government** rigs elections? Is it when the **government** imposes martial law? Is it when the **government** takes away your firearms?"*

– Skip Coryell, Second Amendment March founder (2010)

*"The greatest threat we face today is not terrorists; it is our own federal **government**. If America is conquered or ruined it will be from within, not a foreign enemy."*

– Sheriff Richard Mack, recipient of the NRA's Law Enforcement Officer of the Year Award (2013)

*"We have the 2nd amendment to stop tyrannical **government**. IE: Obama."*

–Utah Gun Rights Activist.

*"I know people who keep AR-15's buried because they're afraid one day the **government** might come for them,"*

– Erick Erickson, a prominent conservative columnist (2019)



*"(It) reminds people that the **government**, if they wish, can destroy you." "People have then suddenly realized that if you are not in the 'protected class,' you're on your own."*

– Paul Jacobson, owner of Jacobson's Gun Center on said on the increase in sales during Covid-19 crisis (2020)

Government "inefficiency"

One of the consistent conservative messages is that government is inherently inefficient and wasteful and that private companies can do everything cheaper, better and faster. Ronald Reagan stated it clearly, "Outside of its legitimate function **government** does nothing as well or economically as the private sector."



*"If you put the federal **government** in charge of the Sahara Desert, in 5 years there'll be a shortage of sand."*

– Milton Friedman (1983)

*"All **government** operation is wasteful, inefficient, and serves the bureaucrat rather than the consumer."*

– Murray N. Rothbard, economist (1985)

*The single most exciting thing you encounter in **government** is competence because it's so rare."*

– Daniel Patrick Moynihan, former New York Senator

*"Practically no **government** program enacted since the 1950s in the West world – or in the communist countries – has been successful."*

– Peter Drucker, management consultant (1989)

*"One of the things the **government** can't do is run anything. The only things our **government** runs are the post office and the railroads, and both of them are bankrupt."*

– Lee Iacocca, automobile executive

*"The federal **government** would run a health care system – or a public plan option – with the compassion of the IRS, the efficiency of the post office, and the incompetence of Katrina."*

– Official summary of GOP Patients' Choice Act (2009)

The economy

Free market conservatives and libertarians have been focused on discrediting Keynesian economics and government intervention in the economy and markets.



*"**Government** cannot make man richer but it can make him poorer."*

– Ludwig von Mises (1929)

*"**Government** 'help' to business is just as disastrous as **government** persecution... the only way a **government** can be of service to national prosperity is by keeping its hands off."*

– Ayn Rand (1962)

*"All the evils, abuses, and iniquities, popularly ascribed to businessmen and to capitalism, were not caused by an unregulated economy or by a free market, but by **government** intervention into the economy."*

– Ayn Rand (1963)



"Government's view of the economy could be summed up in a few short phrases: If it moves, tax it. If it keeps moving, regulate it... and if it stops moving, subsidize it."

– [Ronald Reagan \(1986\)](#)

*"The **government** does not add value to the economy. It removes value from the economy by imposing taxes on one citizen and providing cash to [another](#)."*

– Conservative talk show host Mark R. Levin (2004)

*"The guiding purpose of the **government** regulators is to prevent rather than create something."*

– Alan Greenspan.

*"Anyplace market forces have been artificially removed by the **government** there is a total absence of incentives, competition, effective oversight, costs controls and so on."*

– Ann Coulter (2007)

Minimum wage and paid leave

The legislative history of the minimum wage has unfolded against a backdrop of intense opposition from business leaders, industry representatives, and conservative elected officials.



*"It comes down to this basic premise, and it is one of fairness: Do we empower all in this country to achieve all they can achieve; or would we have **government**, through capricious action, tell those who create jobs, 'No, you are not entitled to create any more jobs; no, we are going to say to you we are going to penalize you for trying to create job opportunities, and instead **it will be the government who decides who giveth and, of course, the government who, obviously, taketh away,**' with historic tax increases from this liberal side of the aisle and their liberal friends at the end of Pennsylvania Avenue."*

– Arizona Rep. J.D. Hayworth (1996)

*"I have long stood against minimum wage hikes, which increase **government** interference in the labor market."*

– California Rep. Wally Herger (2007)

*"Mr. Speaker, today the Democrats say goodbye to 500,000 jobs, according to the Federal Reserve, which is what the impact of increasing the minimum wage will be. That is no problem, though, because most of those folks will get on public benefits, which is exactly where the Democrats want them, right **under the thumb of the Government** so they can create dependency on the **Government**."*

– George Rep. Jack Kingston (1996)

*"We don't think the **government** ought to be in the business of setting wages."*

– Chamber of Commerce spokesman Randy Johnson, Washington Times. (2002)

*"Most businesses would tell you that they presently take care of their employees. They don't need **government** telling them how to do it. "*

– Gary Chandler, Association of Washington Business speaking against Washington State's Family Leave Law (2007)

*"[The FMLA] is an unprecedented, inflexible, **Government**-mandated employee benefit that will strangle both individual and employer flexibility in addressing workplace needs."*

– Senator Orrin Hatch (1992)

Environment

Opposition to environmental laws such as the Clean Air Act, CAFÉ standards and action on climate have used attacks on government to prevent action.



*“America’s market-driven success should be the model for the Paris conference. [...] That means avoiding massive, command-and-control **government** mandates.”*

– [Jack Gerard](#), American Petroleum Institute (2015)

*“If we do not carefully delineate the **government**’s role in regulating [danger] ... there is essentially no limit to how much **government** can ultimately control our lives.”*

– Fred Singer, physicist and climate denier. (1994)

*“But the president and his Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) refuse to let facts get in the way of their determination to impose greater **government** control over the lives of the American people.”*

– [Lamar Smith](#) R-TX at Heritage Foundation event (2015)

*“We could be energy independent. There is an American renaissance, and an industrial renaissance in front of us, if we can just get the **government** out of our way.”*

– Steve Bannon (2016)

Healthy food

Food companies and friendly policy makers have opposed rules and programs to inform Americans about how to eat healthier as another form of oppressive government.



*“I’m not so sure the **government** should get into telling people what they should or shouldn’t eat.” “A hog will] eat about the right amount of protein to go along with the grain. He won’t overeat on the grain and people are surely as smart as a hog.”*

– John R. Block, Reagan Agriculture Secretary, speaking about federal dietary guidelines (1981)

*“When we have a lot of people in Eastern Europe trying to throw off the yoke of central **government**, now might be the time to ask Americans ‘How much **government** do you want?’*

– Clayton Yeutter, Agriculture Secretary speaking against required disclosure of fat, cholesterol and salt content on packaged food (1990)

*“The whole idea of **government** trying to mandate the choice of individuals as to what they can eat is objectionable to us.”*

– Chuck Hunt, New York State Restaurant Association speaking against requiring fast food chains to post calorie counts on menus (2007)

Smoking and health

RJ Reynolds created Get Government Off Our Back in 1994 to fight federal regulation of tobacco. The list of coalition members—many of whom receive funds from tobacco industry—is a who’s who of business, religious and anti-government think tank and political right including ALEC, Americans for Tax Reform, Competitive Enterprise

Institute, Citizens for a Sound Economy, Heartland Institute, National Rifle Association, Traditional Values Coalition, Christian Voters League, Concerned Women for America, the US Chamber of Commerce, and a set of front groups such as The Seniors Coalition and the Law Enforcement Alliance of America.



*"I'm one of America's 45 million smokers. I'm not a moaner or a whiner. But I'm getting fed up. I'd like to get the **government** off my back."*

– [RJ Reynolds newspaper ad](#), showing a man standing in front of a pickup truck (1994)

*[The coalition is a] "grass roots movement responding to the belief of many Americans that our **government**, at all levels, is growing out of control."*

– Arnold Hamm of the Tobacco Growers Information Committee, [press release](#) (note: Grover Norquist is media contact for press release) (1994)

*[FDA regulation of tobacco is] "a perfect example of excessive regulation and big, expensive **government** run amok."*

– Bob Fackler, Tobacco industry lobbyist (1995)

Civil Rights

This rise of this Dixiecrat movement to maintain segregation and white supremacy in the south shows how segregationists and southern business leaders (landlords, cotton mill owners, bankers) became solidly anti-**government**. In 1941 FDR's signed an executive order to create the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC).



*"If the time ever comes when the Supreme Court will have declared that the Federal **Government** has jurisdiction over the civil rights of the individual American citizen, this country will have abandoned the moorings of its constitutional heritage in favor of stateism – the basic philosophy of the Russian system of **government**."*

– Charles Wallace Collins, author *Whither Solid South* (1947)

*"**Government** is a dangerous thing."*

– Alabama Governor Frank Dixon (1948) at "Dixiecrat" Convention

*"This proves that organized mongrel minorities control the **Government**. I'm going to fight it to the last ditch. They're not going to Harlemize the country."*

– Senator James Eastland (1948)

Civil Rights legislation in the 1960s was met with less overtly racist opposition while relying on anti-**government** arguments.



*"By its attempt to regulate and govern the private businesses, which are miscalled public accommodations in the bill, this proposal would inject the **Government** into the most sensitive areas of human contractual relations—agreements for personal services. In so doing, constitutional interpretations of long standing are being swept aside in favor of tortuous rationalizations which studiously ignore the constitutionally-forbidden imposition of involuntary servitude on citizens."*

– Strom Thurmond (1964)

The above is a small sample of a drumbeat flood of anti-government rhetoric in political debates, public campaigns, media interviews and speeches. In the Public Interest will continue to study and write about the conservative assault on government and progressive strategies to build a pro-public movement for the common good.