

# An America that Works for All of Us

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## **An America that Works for All of Us**

I want to talk with you about how we build an America that works for all of us, not just the wealthy few. An America where all of our families and communities thrive, regardless of the circumstances we were born into.

We hear a lot today about how the economy is booming. But for most people it doesn't feel that way. Unemployment may be low too many people are living paycheck to paycheck. Wages may be going up a little, but they can't keep up with the cost of living. Health care costs have soared, deductibles so high you can't actually use your health care. Higher premiums coming out of your paycheck every week. Drug costs that are ridiculous.

For many working families the basics – putting groceries on the table, keeping the tank full, paying the rent or mortgage – require juggling every month. The cost of housing, paying the rent or mortgage, is getting to be more of a burden. There are more and more places in the country where only the rich can afford to live, not the people who work there. And if you don't know what you'd do in an emergency, you're not alone. Four-out-of-ten Americans say they can't afford an unexpected cost of \$400. That's in our booming economy.

And all of us, even families who have an easier time making the basics, worry about the future. How will they ever pay for their kids' college – they may be still paying off their own student loans. How will they ever retire?

Corporations have taken away pensions and left us with retirement accounts are subject to the whims of the market – and that's for those of us who actually have money for retirement. Seniors are trying to make do on fixed incomes, worrying about whether they'll have enough to live with dignity through their retirement and help their kids and grandkids.

But the economy is booming for a few. The rich are not only getting way richer, they are grabbing a bigger share of the wealth that we all helped to create. It's not like the economy didn't move forward over the past 40 years. If corporations had shared the nation's economic progress fairly with their employees, the average working person would take home \$22,000 more a year. That's \$44,000 more in a family with two people working.

Instead, corporations held down wages and benefits and shipped our jobs overseas. CEOs give themselves multi-million-dollar bonuses while lobbying for tax breaks that keep their tax rates lower than their secretaries. Sixty of America's biggest corporations – including Amazon, General Motors and Chevron– paid no federal income tax on their billions of profits in 2018. Their TV ads proclaim that they care about Americans, but the reality is that every day they shirk their responsibility to contribute fairly to our country, to the communities in which they live, and to the Americans who do the hard work every day.

And boy do the rich get richer at our expense! The three wealthiest people in our country have rigged the system so they have as much as half the people in the country. And the incomes of the 1% add up to the 39 times the incomes of the 90%.

But you know this. What's harder to remember is that it doesn't have to be this way. We can work together for an America that works for all of us; an America with the freedom and opportunity for all of us to realize our dreams, and provide security for our families and for our nation.

Getting there won't happen by accident. It will happen by decisions we make together, understanding that we all do better, when we all do better. That's an important expression of our values, but it's more than just that. It's a statement of what it will take to realize the American promise of liberty, justice and opportunity for all.

## **An Economy that Works for All of Us Not Just the Wealthy Few**

What powers our prosperity? Working families and the middle class – the engines of the economy. It's not the stock market or corporate profits that make the economy work for people. When we have good jobs, we can educate our kids, care for our families, afford health care, shop in our own neighborhoods, feel safe in our communities and retire in security, we move the economy forward. We create prosperity.

But that's not the story the wealthy and powerful have told us. When we demand that we receive our fair share of the wealth we create what are we told that it will kill jobs. That's trickle-down economics – an extortion racket where the wealthy try to convince us that if working people do better that it will be bad for the economy.

They like to say that businesses are the job creators. But think about it. People are the job creators. Where would business be without customers? Where would business be without workers? You can't sell to people who don't have the money to buy! You can't hire people who can't read!

And they tell us to shrink government to help business. But no business could get its goods to market without publicly built roads and bridges. No business could trust that the contracts it signs would be valid without our courts. No business could find educated workers without our public schools.

And you know what they do more than anything else to hold onto their power? They try to divide us. They try to divide us by race. By gender. Or where we come from. They point the blame on immigrants or refugees. Or on working people whose employers pay so little that they rely on government benefits to support their families.

Why do they do this? So they can hold on to their power to rig the rules of our economy and democracy in their favor. It's an old trick but they'll keep doing it as long as it works. It's up to us to let them know we're on to their old tricks.

The fact is, the more people who have the opportunity to fully participate in our economy, the better we all do and the better our country does. And that means giving everyone the opportunity to fully contribute to our communities, Black, Brown and White, wherever we come. Whatever our gender or religion. Our success depends on the success of those around us. Our communities thrive when everyone thrives.

Let's talk about some of the things we need to do to build an economy, a government and a democracy that works for all of us, not just the super-rich.

We should make improving the incomes and economic security of working families and the middle-class our first priority. Raise the minimum wage to at least \$15 an hour across the country, which will bump up wages for working people who get paid more than the minimum wage. Close the loophole that allows corporations to avoid paying millions of working people the overtime they've earned. Be sure that every job is a good job with decent benefits.

And when we do this, we should be sure that women get paid more than men for the same work. That Black and Brown people get paid the same as Whites for the same work. That's not just fair, with those added earnings families and communities across our nation will thrive.

We need to restore to workers the freedom to stand together and organize unions. We need to rewrite labor law to make it work for today's economy – an age of global supply chains, huge franchise firms and temp workers. When working people have the freedom to organize together, they raise the wages for everyone. When temp workers and part-time workers and gig and contract workers get the same protections and benefits that regular employees have, they too will be better able to care for and support their families.

But we know that decent pay alone is not enough to care for our families today. Every job should have paid sick days and paid family leave, so we can afford to take the time we need to care for a new baby or sick parent.

It's not just about making the jobs we have better. We have to invest in creating more good jobs.

We can rebuild our crumbling roads and bridges. We can modernize our schools and our electric grid.

We can create millions of good jobs and safeguard the health of our families and our communities by investing in clean, renewable energy. By stopping our reliance on the fossil fuels that are polluting our air and driving the weather catastrophes we see more of almost every day. And we can be sure that we invest and safeguard in all our communities, including low-income and communities of color, where fossil fuel companies and chemical companies have most often polluted our water and air.

## **A Government that Works for All of Us Not Just Corporate Lobbyists**

You know, it's not whether government is big or small that matters, it's whether it works for the wealthy few and big corporations or for working families and the middle class. To have an economy that works for all of us, we need our government to work for all of us, not just CEOs.

To give all our children the start they need to realize their promise, their potential, we need to assure that every child in America – regardless of their zip code – has the opportunity to attend a great public school. Every student should have a qualified, well-prepared, caring and committed teacher, a teacher who is given the support and resources that matches her commitment.

Let's stop saddling our young people with tens of thousands of dollars of student debt, with free tuition at public universities and colleges. And by linking paying back student loans to earnings.

And while we are talking about good jobs and health care, we must not go back to the time when insurance companies could deny you coverage for a pre-existing condition and where one serious illness or accident could result in bankruptcy.

Let's go forward to be sure that quality, affordable health care is guaranteed to every person in our nation. Let's open up Medicare to everyone. Let's be sure that however you are covered, you can afford your coverage and you can afford to use your coverage. Let's use our government's purchasing power to bring down the cost not just of prescription drugs, but of all our health care costs. And be sure that every community – rural, urban and suburban– has quality health providers who understand the community's needs.

Security for all includes a secure retirement. The right has been calling for cutting Social Security. But now, progressive champions in Congress are changing the debate., - pushing for boosting Social Security benefits, not cutting them.

When we are asked how will we pay for investing in our families, our communities and our nation. When we told we are "we are broke," we have to remember that the truth is "we've been robbed." When we give tax breaks to big corporations to move jobs overseas, we've been robbed. When we allow billionaires to pay lower income taxes than their secretaries, we've been robbed. The Trump administration and Republicans in Congress gave more than a trillion dollars in tax breaks to the super-rich and corporations, money they spent making CEOs

and ,shareholders even richer, fattening their Cayman Island bank accounts. Let's take that money back and more. Our tax system is upside down; we need to turn it right side up.

We can close those corporate loopholes and raise corporate tax rates so that corporations pay their fair share for the public structures – the roads, the airports, the educated workforce, the police and courts – that enable them to make profits.

We can demand not only that millionaires pay higher taxes than their secretaries, we can take back some of the huge sums of money that billionaires have taken from the rest of us, with a wealth tax that will begin to correct for the huge imbalance in wealth and income that is crushing our hopes and slowing down economic growth. When we repurpose some of those billions for education and infrastructure and making child care and college and health care more affordable, we will build more thriving communities throughout our nation.

We also can be sure that we spend money wisely, to benefit working families and the middle-class, instead of spending driven by lobbyists for huge corporations. The biggest culprit, bar none, are Pentagon contractors, who push what former Defense Secretary Robert Gates called “unnecessary and extravagant” weapons like the \$1.5 trillion F-35 plane. Lockheed has more than 1,000 lobbyists – that's about two for every member of Congress. While funding for our troops and veterans are being squeezed, the CEO of Lockheed Martin, the plane's manufacturer, made \$21 million last year alone.

A government that works for all of us means that we put more justice in our criminal justice system. More and more Americans are understanding that our criminal justice system is a major barrier to opportunity. They've had their eyes opened because young Black people refused to be silent and invisible. And people see the videos that show the consequences of driving while Black, or selling cigarettes while Black, more and more White Americans are understanding just what this means.

The young men and women who declare Black Lives Matter are sick of seeing lives destroyed by a criminal justice system that targets Black and Brown men and women for harassment, using bail to lock them up so they can't pay the rent, denies them effective lawyers, threatens them with years and years of prison and coerces them to agree to plea bargains that leave them with criminal records – so they can't find work, they can't get student loans, they can't vote. That robs them of their futures and destroys their families.

And this system preys on lots of White Americans too. They may not enter it through the door of racial profiling but they often are trapped in the same system, with the same ruining of their

lives and futures. But the good news is today most Americans agree that we should end cash bail – yes there’s a majority for that – and turn away from mass incarceration.

Other young movement makers, the other great risk takers, are the Dreamers. They are leading the movement to stay in the only country they know. To keep their families together. And to keep all families together. To remind us that welcoming immigrants has always been a core American value. Literally the way we built our nation. It’s time that we provide a pathway to citizenship for millions of aspiring citizens, who are working and living in communities across America.

Young people are also leading the way to free ourselves from gun violence. To stand up to the NRA and take common-sense measures – universal background checks, no assault weapons, to safeguard our children, our communities, where we work. All our communities, those threatened by mass shootings and those by gang violence.

## **A Democracy that Works for All of Us, Not Just CEO Campaign Contributors**

The biggest obstacle standing in the way of opportunity for all? A system that works for the money, instead of the many. It’s up to us to hold our elected officials responsible for providing opportunity for every American, not just those with the most money.

We should insist that they remove barriers to voting, so that everyone has the opportunity to make our voices heard. In Congress, we can start by modernizing the Voting Rights Act, to stop states from putting up politically-motivated blocks to people voting. Barriers put up in particular – just like before the Voting Rights Act – to make it harder for many people of color to vote. Let’s register people automatically and follow the lead of states that enable people to vote by mail or in person for weeks before Election Day and on Election Day.

Let’s stop politicians from picking voters by outlawing partisan gerrymandering and so that legislative districts in our states and in Congress are drawn in a non-partisan way.

Let’s actually have a democracy when it comes to choosing our President and replace the Electoral College with a popular vote.

And let's enable candidates for office to complete without having to raise money from wealthy donors and PACs. Candidates should be able to run for office without big money, relying instead on small contributions matched by public funds.

We need a president who will appoint justices to the Supreme Court who have the common sense to know that money is not speech and corporations are not people.

## **Alone or Together?**

Most Americans – often an overwhelming majority of us – agree with this vision for how to create an America that works for all of us. But sadly, there's not a political consensus on these ideas. There's more than politics and campaign cash behind these differences – although there's plenty of that. The gap between the right and the positions supported by the majority of Americans are also a difference in values. Or I should say, in different concepts of values.

Take freedom. We all treasure the importance of freedom of speech, of worship and of assembly. But working families also treasure what President Franklin Roosevelt called “freedom from want.” We believe that you cannot truly be free if you have to worry every day whether you can pay the bills. If you lie awake at night wondering how you'll ever be able to retire. Or if you just graduated from college and already are trapped by tens of thousands of dollars of student loans.

Another values gap is in the concept of opportunity. As many on the right tell it, the only path toward opportunity out is to work hard by yourself, with the help of your family. You are simply on your own.

We agree that opportunity includes working hard and being responsible to care for you and your family. But we also understand that nobody makes it on their own. Everyone has had help, in countless ways. And without that help, individuals and families are left behind. We understand that hard work that isn't rewarded by decent pay, shuts off opportunity.

We also understand that for many people, the game is stacked against them. We don't all start from the same place. Poor schools can limit your options, no matter how hard you study. Many of us need a lift to get to the same chances in life, to get a good education and job and realize our dreams.



Some like to talk about personal responsibility. That is a core American value, to work hard, realize your full potential, care for yourself and your family. But there's more to responsibility than me, myself and I. Responsibility is also about caring for each other. Building strong communities. Each of us doing our fair share. Understanding the truth that when each of us does better, we all do better.

## **An America that Works for All of Us**

Now there will be those who say what we seek is impossible. That an America that works for all of us, is beyond our reach.

But as Muhammad Ali said, "Impossible is just a big word thrown around by small men who find it easier to live in the world they've been given than to explore the power they have to change it."

It is up to us to turn the impossible into the possible. To generate the next historic wave of justice, of progress in our nation. Change happens when people are in motion, animated by a vision of a better world for our children.

Our history teaches us that change comes not in sips, but in gulps. Not in eddies, but in waves. And that change comes often when we least expect it.

The great wave of the Progressive movement broke just after the first Gilded Age, where robber barons ruled. And with it we won anti-trust laws, the income tax, protections on food quality, direct election of senators, women's suffrage, the first child labor laws, bans on corporate political contributions.

The next great wave of the New Deal broke after the Great Depression. That movement wave delivered the minimum wage, union organizing rights, Social Security, bank regulation, unemployment insurance and much more.

And then, after the darkness of McCarthyism, we had so many movements: the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the labor and consumer and environmental movements. And we won the voting rights act, Medicare, Medicaid, the Clean Air and Water Acts, consumer protections, food stamps, Roe v. Wade. It took longer, but the LGBT movement won marriage equality.

Today again we are seeing new movements and a new vision for an America that works for all of us. And like many of these movements, the change is bubbling up, first in cities and states, building towards the coming tsunami of national progress.

We believe that it's up to us to work together to build an America that works for all of us. An America with the freedom and opportunity to realize our aspirations, to care for and provide security for our families. Together, we **can** build strong communities, in which all our families can thrive, regardless of the circumstances of our birth.

When you stood in school and took the pledge of allegiance, was it a pledge for liberty and justice for the few, for the wealthy and powerful? Or was it a pledge for liberty and justice for all? That's the pledge I remember taking, liberty and justice in an America that works for all.

It really is true. We all do better when we all do better. America works best when we all do our part and work together as one nation, indivisible and strong. When each of us does our part in exchange for the blessings of liberty, committed to the country we love. We will meet the challenge of today, for us, for our children, for our grandchildren. We will organize our neighbors in communities across the country for an America that works for all of us, with liberty, justice and opportunity for all. We can do this. This is what the best of America is all about.

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