Breaking Power to Build Democracy

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Empowering Democracy Initiative White Paper
www.democracyempowered.org

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"Freedom is never granted; it is won. Justice is never given; it is exacted."
–Asa Philip Randolph

Democratic politics requires collective decision-making in the context of incommensurable interests. Conflict is therefore an inevitable feature of healthy democracies. But when political power becomes grossly uneven, the productive conflict that is a central feature of well-functioning democracies is perilously suppressed. Such chronic and systematic imbalances of power between elites and ordinary people are a defining challenge of contemporary politics. In the United States, economic elites have amassed enough power to alter the rules of the political game in their favor, control pivotal institutions, and evade accountability (Domhoff, 2014; Hertel-Fernandez, 2019; Hertel-Fernandez, Skocpol & Sclar 2018; Winters and Page, 2009).

Given this context, balancing the scales of democratic governance requires subverting excessive and unequal power relations by dismantling concentrated and oligarchic power. Building "a more inclusive, responsive, sustainable, and egalitarian multiracial democracy" necessitates breaking the disproportionate power of elite institutions and actors (2026 EDI framework memo; Michener 2022a). A commitment to democratic governance dictates the deconstruction of any power that persistently privileges the preferences and profit of the few over the needs and demands of the many. This paper elaborates on the concrete implications of this observation. We sketch the contours and logic of power deconstruction by tracing the efforts of organized groups—at times aided by, and at times impeded by government—to fight back against powerful elites.

"Breaking" and "deconstructing" are not words generally associated with ideal visions of democracy. Indeed, in a political environment marked by deep and dysfunctional partisan polarization, talk of "breaking" power can seem like throwing fuel on an already raging fire. But power deconstruction in the service of reconstructing democracy is not a divisive enterprise. To the contrary, breaking power holds real promise for unifying otherwise divided groups. The political elites who monopolize contemporary U.S. politics benefit from partisan polarization, racism, geographic divides, and other forces that obscure the extractive material practices harming U.S. denizens across and within these dimensions of difference. Democratic action that alienates, weakens, and excludes elites who engage in predatory practices, can protect, uplift, and build power among those who are harmed by such practices. Bilal Beydoun (2025) offered clarifying insight, noting that,

> politics that includes everyone—the predatory landlord and the tenant, the cancer patient and the for-profit insurer, the grocery shopper and the price gouger, the taxpayer and the tax dodger—too often collides with the commonsense understanding that *harm must come from somewhere*…And done effectively, *well-considered conflict* can provide the explanatory power needed to help people make sense of their discontents (emphasis added).

A focus on deconstructing power points us towards "well-considered conflict" that can expand the seemingly limited political pathways available in our current politics and thereby broaden the possibilities for transformative structural change. As Beydoun suggests, the prevailing configuration of U.S. politics too often compels ordinary people to disengage from politics entirely or to make common cause with the very elites who are perpetrating harm against them and profiting from doing so.

We follow Beydoun in asserting that "harm must come from somewhere." Even a cursory assessment of the material realities that characterize life in the U.S. reveals this. Despite immense wealth and financial wherewithal, economic hardship in the United States is widespread. Over half of Americans lack the resources to cover what they need to live securely (Urban Institute, 2025). As the costs of healthcare, housing, food, childcare, and other expenses of daily life are rising precipitously, wages have grown only sparingly since the 1970s (Urban Institute, 2025; Clemens, 2025). Economic precarity and financial struggle have proliferated, while extreme wealth has become more concentrated. The top one percent of U.S. households owns nearly 32 percent of all U.S. wealth (roughly 55 trillion in assets), while the bottom 50 percent own less than 3 percent (Federal Reserve, 2026).

Massive wealth inequality is not an inevitable consequence of natural economic processes; it is a politically contingent outcome that reflects durable dynamics of racial and economic power (Murad and Michener, 2026). Disproportionate wealth is an indicator of disproportionate power and a harbinger of disproportionate harm. Such harm does not materialize passively. It is actively produced by elites who deploy their power to secure their interests at the expense of others. Predatory landlords, monopolistic insurers, corporate profiteers, and similarly positioned actors regularly cause identifiable harm to the health and well-being of millions of people (Erickson 2022; Grineski and Hernández 2010; Manni, Petticre and Galea 2023). To stem the tide of that harm, we must break the power of these actors and the institutions that buttress them.

A focus on specific material harms underscores that power deconstruction is neither inherently partisan nor unduly divisive. Breaking power is not about targeting partisan opponents, winning ideological battles, or fomenting conflict for political gain. Instead, the goal of breaking power is to prevent widespread harm. Indeed, an emphasis on harm engenders solidarity because harm maps to collective experiences of predation and precarity that form the basis of shared interests across racial, geographic, religious, and even partisan divides. While "deconstructing" or "breaking" may seem antagonistic at first blush, mitigating mass harm is very much a unifying undertaking. Moreover, the very existence of such harm suggests that when organized people, interests, or coalitions enter political conflict with the intent of breaking concentrated power, they are not sowing discord that would otherwise be absent. Instead, they are visibilizing and resisting wrongs that are already present. Conflict is implied in harm. When those being harmed organize against the forces responsible, they enter a dynamic field that is already moving against them and navigate that field as underdogs.

Our emphasis on organized groups as the primary actors engaged in power deconstruction is informed by our perspective on political power as fundamentally relational (Dahl 1957; Fung 2020; Lukes 1974; Michener 2022b). This means that power is a function of the constraints and possibilities that flow from relationships between groups, actors, and institutions within a polity. In a political struggle where well-resourced and highly advantaged numerical minorities can advance their interests and inflict harm on others with little to no accountability, we can reasonably conclude that they have outsized power. And as Frederick Douglas so incisively asserted, "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will." Since powerful actors that benefit from inflicting harm will not concede unless they are forced to, power deconstruction necessarily involves compelling concessions from such actors (e.g., advancing the interests of those who suffer harm by constraining, impeding, or extracting a price from those who carry it out).

As groups, coalitions, and interests work to build their own power and break the power of their adversaries, the state has a role to play. Governments can enact or enforce policies or regulations that make power deconstruction more or less difficult. Towards the end of this paper, we reflect on what that might look like in practice. However, here at the outset, we want to emphasize that while state intervention can transform the landscape of political struggle, the state is not the primary entity that denizens should rely upon to build or break power. The state is not (and should not be) the primary, singular, or ultimate arbiter of power struggle. In a democratic polity (or one that aspires to be such), ordinary people (organized on their own behalf) must be the engine of power construction and deconstruction.

The Logic of Power Deconstruction

Deconstructing power through "well-considered conflict" involves strategically targeting actors and institutions that harm material well-being on a collective level. To this end, we emphasize four power shifting actions:

1) Identifying harms and their sources.
2) Intervening in the processes that account for harms.
3) Prioritizing pathways that produce positive feedback loops.
4) Building the power of people and communities that are most acutely harmed.

In the pages to follow, we demonstrate these power shifting actions via two concrete cases: the tobacco industry and private equity in housing. In doing so, we develop insights on the priorities, practices, and (to a lesser extent) policies through which power deconstruction operates.

Identifying Specific Harms and their Sources

Not all sociopolitical problems can be accounted for through the lens of harm. When prevailing conditions suggest causes other than the self-interested domination of elites, power deconstruction may not be the best way to advance change. Indeed, an important first step of power deconstruction is to identify whether a social ill is a product of harms perpetrated against the many by (and for the benefit of) the few. If we can answer that question in the affirmative, then power deconstruction should be carefully considered among the approaches needed to address the problem(s) at issue. Pervasiveness, intensity, and strategic opportunity are three instructive criteria for determining whether and when harms necessitate deconstructing power.

Pervasive harms are those that affect many people, extending across geographic communities, social groups, and political contexts. Pervasive harms need not affect everyone, and they certainly do not affect everyone equally. In fact, the structure of the American political economy is such that most harms are marked by systemic racial and economic disproportionalities that must be acknowledged and incorporated into strategic thinking around power deconstruction. Most broadly, pervasive harms map to concrete outcomes that have clear and compelling stakes at the mass level. Concentrated elite power is formidable. Taking it on necessitates activating, mobilizing, and organizing large groups of people. Pervasive harms make an especially suitable basis for doing so.

Intense harms are those that affect people in ways that are readily perceptible in their everyday lives. Pervasive harms are unlikely to catalyze movement unless they are deeply and tangibly felt. And while perceptions of intensity are (in part) politically constructed (e.g., news media, social media, elite political discourse, organizing, etc.), they are also a function of grounded experiences. When those experiences are sufficiently intense (implicating people's livelihoods, safety, and dignity), they can motivate both those who experience them directly and those who witness them affecting others. This does not happen automatically (grievances do not inevitably spur action), but intensity is a facilitative condition for power breaking.

Strategic opportunity is heightened when the actors perpetrating harm are exposed, when acute or egregious harms become especially salient, or when previously strong coalitions or policy subsystems begin to fray. If powerful elites become vulnerable in the face of these and other circumstances, then targeting the harms that they cause poses a distinct opportunity to break power.

Once specific harms are identified based on these criteria, an important next step is to identify the key actors and institutions most substantially benefitting from those harms. Those who profit from harm are likely to be the most active in maintaining it, and theirs is the power that must be broken. Pinpointing the sources of harm is not a straightforward exercise. The power of dominant elites often lies in their invisibility. The task of accurately and comprehensively identifying the sources of harm is a necessary early step in breaking power.

Levels and Levers: Intervening in the Processes that Account for Harms

When harms and their sources have been identified, the next step in power deconstruction is to intervene in the political and economic processes through which such harms are enabled. Deploying tactics to weaken, displace, or change the behavior of harm producing actors will require careful strategizing about the optimal institutional levers across levels of government, geographies, and substantive issue domains. In a context of limited resources, it is not possible to pull all levers at all levels. For this reason, one must carefully consider where harm producing actors are situated in terms of level of governance (local, state, federal), economic sector, and sphere of influence.

This line of thinking necessitates close attention to the structural features of the polity. For example, the U.S. constitutional order is defined by institutions that proliferate veto points (Miller, 2023). Historically, this structure has meant that even incredibly popular policies (e.g., minimum wage increases, generous parental leave, worker protections) are difficult to pass and readily stymied by determined and powerful (numerical) minorities. Over time, U.S. "veto exceptionalism" has systematically privileged elite political actors and consistently undermined grassroots demands (Miller 2023; Grumbach and Michener 2022). A keen and strategic understanding of veto points in U.S. politics can anchor clear eyed assessment of where and how elite power can be broken.

To facilitate this kind of discernment, we suggest examining the specific mechanisms (in and beyond government) by which those profiting from harm are shielded, strengthened, and supported. Tangibly, this means scrutinizing how to shift resources away from harm-inducing organizations or institutions, how to alter market structures in ways that weaken such institutions, how to limit harmful actors' access to and power within government, and how to cultivate narrative landscapes that disadvantage and constrain the cultural terrain that elite actors operate within.

Even more important is the imperative of thinking critically about who must be activated to take these steps. We argue that the work of power shifting should not be singularly, primarily, or centrally taken up by government officials or other relatively privileged members of various professional classes. While such people have a role to play in power deconstruction, the pivotal (and chronically underestimated) protagonists in efforts to break power are the everyday denizens who are most vulnerable to the harms that necessitate power deconstruction in the first place.

Prioritizing Pathways that Produce Feedback

In a complex, federated polity where governments make many decisions through proliferating channels, and where dominant elite actors are (relatively) plentiful, there are often multiple feasible paths to breaking power. In this context, prioritization is vital. A useful way to do so is by considering which pathways to change have the potential to catalyze positive feedback (Hertel-Fernandez 2020; Michener 2023b). Which harms, actors, and institutional levers can enable change in the current moment while simultaneously seeding power for future moments? This may happen through policies that weaken the power of harm-inducing actors over the long term or through structural interventions that develop or strengthen key sources of countervailing power.

The invocation of feedback highlights a core reality of power deconstruction: politics is an iterative game. Unequivocally or inalterably breaking the power of dominant elites is unlikely. Power deconstruction is neither a panacea nor a one-off. Instead, it is part of strategic, dynamically evolving, multipronged and sometimes overlapping efforts that may also include (and that can overlap with) electoral campaigns, social movements, and more. Though power deconstruction is only one mode of political action, it can nevertheless contribute to changing power dynamics in the medium-to-long term and forefend against uncontested slides into oligarchy.

Building the Power of People and Communities
While breaking power lends itself to a focus on the actors producing the harm, it is also fundamentally tethered to those experiencing the harm. Among a range of possibilities for deconstructing the power of dominant elites, it is essential to center strategies that simultaneously build countervailing power among the groups and communities that have been harmed (Andrias and Sachs 2020; Fung and Wright 2003; Galbraith 1954). In this way, breaking and building power can be usefully tethered via democratically enhancing and self-reinforcing practices.

Building power happens when people facing pervasive, intense harms are organized at and across local levels in ways that cultivate, channel and grow their political capacity and influence (Michener 2022). Such organizing entails, "the strategic development of political formations (groups, networks, coalitions) that equip people and communities to exercise collective power over the processes that affect their lives" (Michener 2025: 194). Even more specifically, organizing involves a range of targeted actions including direct action, careful engagement with political institutions (e.g., legislatures, courts), negotiation or confrontation with political elites, narrative strategy, and more (Michener 2022a, 2025; Murad and Michener 2026). The common threads across these tactics are relationality (the people being organized have substantive relationships with one another), power sharing (the people being organized have voice and influence within the organizing institutions), and strategy (decisions are tactically based on political knowledge and shared understandings of what drives change) (Michener 2025). Processes for breaking power often (though do not always) unfold through processes that build power. This creates potential for a virtuous, democracy strengthening cycle.

Lessons from Key Cases

In the sections to follow, we concretize the steps outlined above through analysis of two specific cases: big tobacco and private equity in housing. These cases tangibly illustrate processes of power deconstruction.

The first case—the tobacco industry— focuses on a historical example that has been playing out over more than a century. This long view can help us think about the sequencing and evolution of power deconstruction. The case of big tobacco involves a notably wide range of power breaking strategies that have been heavily oriented around formal governmental institutions (courts, legislators, regulators, bureaucracies). But even as this case has been rooted in leveraging governmental power to break corporate power, it has hinged on community-driven, grassroots power at the local level.

The second case—private equity in housing— is a contemporary example of a recent fight that is not yet resolved. It has nonetheless demonstrated key steps in power deconstruction and modeled crucial lessons. We focus specifically on tenant organizers' coordinated efforts to break the power of Capital Realty, an especially egregious corporate actor in the domain of housing. While the fight against Capital Realty has involved legislators and bureaucratic agencies, it has been more squarely oriented around direct action and narrative strategy, centering on strategic intervention by the people most directly harmed (tenants).

Both cases involve pervasive and intense harms, readily identifiable actors responsible for perpetrating those harms, carefully considered institutional pathways through which such actors are enabled, multilevel strategies for breaking dominant elite power, and concomitant actions that build the power of those who are most acutely harmed. The similarities, contrasts and approaches demonstrated through these cases supply instructive lessons on power deconstruction.

Deconstructing the Power of Big Tobacco

The harms of tobacco are clear, undeniable, and costly. Tobacco kills roughly 500,000 Americans each year. Tobacco deaths and illnesses constitute a long running and immensely lethal epidemic. In the 20th century, more than 100 million people worldwide died because of tobacco consumption (this exceeds the death toll of World War I and World War II combined). Moreover, tobacco's damage extends far beyond death. Cigarette smoking costs the United States more than 600 billion dollars each year (this includes more than $240 billion in healthcare spending and roughly $372 billion in lost productivity) (U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2024).

The pernicious effects of tobacco are disconcertingly disproportionate. American Indians and Alaska Natives have the highest smoking rate of any racial or ethnic group. Tobacco use is significantly higher in low-income households, and tobacco use prevalence is higher among adults who are uninsured or enrolled in Medicaid (compared to those with private insurance or Medicare) (U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2024).

Though the harms of tobacco have not been eliminated, they have been significantly abated over the last several decades. Estimates suggest that between 1964 and 2012, eight million smoking-related, premature tobacco related deaths were avoided in the U.S. due to tobacco control measures (Holford et al. 2014). Tobacco control policies enacted between 1970 and 2022 reduced rates of lung cancer so substantially that these laws helped to preserve 76 million years of life (Islami et al. 2025). If the power of the tobacco industry had not been weakened in the critical ways that we describe below, the toll on human life would have been even more staggering. For this reason, the case of tobacco exemplifies the transformative stakes of power deconstruction.

Big Tobacco: The Political Economy of Entrenched Power

The U.S. cigarette industry has a long and storied history of accumulating wealth and power (Milov 2019). Through much of the 20th century (1900-1960s), tobacco companies entrenched their power across multiple interconnected domains: economic, political, cultural. Even as their power waned in the latter part of the 1900s and into the 2000s), they have retained enough political influence to remain a formidable force for harm in the U.S. and around the world.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Americans used tobacco primarily in the form of cigars and chewing tobacco (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2007). These relatively costly and unpalatable means of nicotine consumption limited the scope of viable consumer markets. Cigarettes changed this. They proved a more efficient and less expensive channel for the transmission of nicotine. By the advent of mechanized production in the 1880s, cigarettes could be produced in greater quantities at lower costs, leading to a dramatic drop in prices and a significant growth in consumers (Chaloupka et al. 2002; Giovino 2002).

A large consumer base translated into astounding profits and imposing economic power. By 1992, for example, Philip Morris was the seventh-largest industrial corporation in the U.S. and ranked first in profits ($4.9 billion). In 2018, the world's six largest tobacco manufacturers made over $55 billion in profit. By 2025, global revenues for the tobacco industry were in the ballpark of half a trillion annually. The ever-rising profits of the industry (even in the face of declining U.S. consumption) have been enabled by a morally reprehensible tolerance for harming humanity, the rampant exploitation of tobacco farmers and other marginalized workers—especially poor farmers and tenant farmers in the South—and (with the help of federal and state governments) consistent and sweeping manipulation of domestic and international markets (Milov 2019).

The longstanding and continued economic power of the tobacco industry has been a means of securing political power. Big tobacco has directly and extensively influenced the government by exerting control over ballot initiatives, legislative processes, regulatory agencies, and more. In 2023, the industry registered over 200 lobbyists at the federal level alone (Action on Smoking & Health). The largest cigarette companies are regular donors to both Democrats and Republicans, and evidence suggests a strong and positive correlation between receiving such donations and policymakers' stances towards issues like opposing taxes and FDA regulations (Luke and Krauss 2004;

Mondardi and Glantz 1998). Altogether, the tobacco industry is deeply embedded in executive and legislative institutions at the local, state, and federal levels.

Even as it accrued political influence, the tobacco industry simultaneously secured itself by intentionally and thoroughly building cultural and narrative power through exorbitant investments in advertising. This has not only served the purpose of growing the customer base, it also desensitized people to the harm of smoking, and created positive cultural lore around cigarettes. As a result of such efforts, smoking was very popular for much of the 20th century. In the 1920s, cigarettes were dubbed Torches of Freedom, as manufacturers attempting to market to women posited smoking as an act of personal liberation and independence from the strictures of social norms. In the wake of the great depression, cigarettes came to represent an affordable luxury that offered reprieve from stressful economic woes (Milov 2019). During and after World War II, cigarettes were boosted as a privilege for hard working soldiers (Milov 2019). In the midst of the cold war, American cigarettes were marketed globally as symbols of Western freedom. These and other narratives, along with the saturation of airwaves and television screens with symbols that became household names ("Joe Camel", the "Marlboro Man") established the narrative power of tobacco.

The concentrated multifaceted power of big tobacco is antithetical to democracy. At base, it is anti-democratic for a polity to enable health harming industries at the expense of collective well-being and in the context of widespread opposition (which only grew over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries). Legitimate democratic polities do not facilitate lethal incursions against mass numbers of people for the sake of corporate profit.

Even in the face of the entrenched power described above, coalitions of mass membership groups, public health officials, and other health organizations (philanthropic foundations, health related non-profits) have consistently fought to curb, delimit, and deconstruct the power of the tobacco industry. Though there has been no resounding or unequivocal "win" against tobacco, opponents of the industry have had salient and seminal victories. What's more is that anti-tobacco actors have persevered through a long, slow, and fraught march on the road of power deconstruction. That march has been punctuated by both wins and setbacks. This dynamic ebb and flow is an endemic aspect of power deconstruction. In order to make incremental but significant progress, anti-tobacco organizers and advocates have used a range of power shifting strategies to structure their approaches, gain momentum, and winnow the power of the industry. We highlight specific choices, strategies, and moments that can inform contemporary organizers, funders, policymakers and other change agents seeking to pursue power deconstruction strategies.

The Imperative of Identifying Harms

Identifying major cigarette companies is not difficult. Big tobacco consists of a handful of transnational companies that account for the vast share of the global cigarette market. While in some cases, companies obscure themselves and their operations to make it difficult to organize against them, that is not what big tobacco does. From Philipp Morris (often the leader of the proverbial pack) on down, these companies do not find protection by hiding themselves. Instead, they find it by obscuring the harms that they perpetrate. Notwithstanding the statistics noted earlier, cigarette companies have invested enormous resources into mass disinformation campaigns, openly denying the patent reality of health harms for decades.

To accomplish this, cigarette companies have willfully undermined scientific research. They went so far as to fund their own research institution, the Center for Indoor Air Research (CIAR), an organization created by U.S. tobacco companies in 1988. CAIR's stated mission is to fund "objective" research related to indoor air, including studies of tobacco smoke. The compromised research produced by this organization has been employed to muddy the evidentiary waters, confuse the public, and prop up the interests of big tobacco (Barnes and Bero 1996). More generally, the tobacco industry has been a skillful "pioneer of fake news"—twisting even the most damning evidence to mute deleterious effects on profits (McKee 2017; Smith et al. 2011). In 1954, for example, US tobacco manufacturers sponsored an advertisement entitled "A Frank Statement to Cigarette Smokers" that appeared in 448 newspapers in 258 cities reaching more than 43 million Americans. The advertisement questioned research findings implicating smoking as a cause of cancer, assured consumers that cigarettes were safe, and promised to support impartial research to investigate the effects of smoking (Cummings et al. 2002). As late as 1999— long past the point that the health harms of smoking were incontrovertible—cigarette companies continued in this denial (Cummings et. al. 2002).

By 2006, a U.S. Federal Court ruled in United States v. Philip Morris that "the major domestic cigarette manufacturers were guilty of conspiring to deny, distort, and minimize the hazards of cigarette smoking to the public and ordered corrective statements to correct these deceptions" (Smith et al. 2011). But this ruling came many decades after anti-smoking citizen groups and advocates began calling out the health harms of cigarettes and demanding accountability. In the long interim between the formal declaration of the court and the lived knowledge of the people who were being harmed, a major task of those seeking to break the power of big tobacco was to explicitly identify and compellingly make the case that cigarettes were harmful. They did this through coordinated local action, working with researchers, philanthropic funders, and public health officials to produce and share alternative streams of research, facilitating "citizen science" campaigns where ordinary people collected their own data, and leveraging media to tell their own stories. Local organizers did not wait for official evidence. When evidence was compromised, neglected, and downplayed by dominant elites—they took steps to deconstruct the power of big tobacco by identifying the harms that they mockingly and vehemently denied.

Levels and Levers: Catalyzing Cascades of Action

Weakening the tobacco industry required a multipronged strategy of regulatory, legislative, judicial levers that were used at the local, state, and national levels in varying ways over time. Importantly, not all of this activity was strategic. It was not all tightly coordinated and intentionally planned (certainly not in the same way we'll show below, when we elaborate the Capital Realty fight). But some degree of decentralization and non-coordination was both inevitable and useful among anti-smoking coalitions. The harms of big tobacco were contested and unclear at first, so a unified, collective response to those harms was not possible. Even more is that big tobacco was too powerful and too ubiquitous to be weakened by a single (even if federated or large) group. The scale of the power being broken required many efforts, in many different places, that have taken many different forms over a long period of time. For example, between the 1970s and 2004, more than 1,700 U.S. communities adopted some form of smoking restriction in public places (Center for Disease Control, 2005). What started as dozens of such policies in the 1970s mushroomed to thousands by the early aughts. Though seemingly chaotic, this approach of flooding the zone maximally leverages the federated nature of the polity, the multifaceted nature of U.S. governance, and the varied strengths and capacities of the actors involved. In doing so, anti-smoking actors generated opportunities for learning, diffusion, and cascades of action. Local campaigns informed state campaigns, state and local action spurred federal intervention, and federal dictates (legislation, regulation, court cases) had widespread effects. These cascades grew in strength and influence over time, underscoring the need for patience, and strategic incrementalism in processes of deconstruction power.

Building the Power to Break Power: Antismoking Organizations

Over the course of the second half of the twentieth century, a strong tobacco control movement emerged (Wolfson 2017). Organized mass membership groups and advocacy organizations took action against big tobacco *prior to* government officials at the local, state, and national levels. Many of these groups took steps to build power at the grassroots level to influence government actors and ultimately break the power of cigarette companies. An assessment of efforts to deconstruct the power of big tobacco reveals widespread, grassroots organizing as well as multifaceted grasstops advocacy. Especially important indicators of efforts to build power include:

- The emergence of national groups with mass memberships and chapters all over the country. Groups such as Americans for Nonsmokers Rights (ANR), Doctors Ought to Care (DOC), Stop Teenage Access to Tobacco (STAT), and the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids.

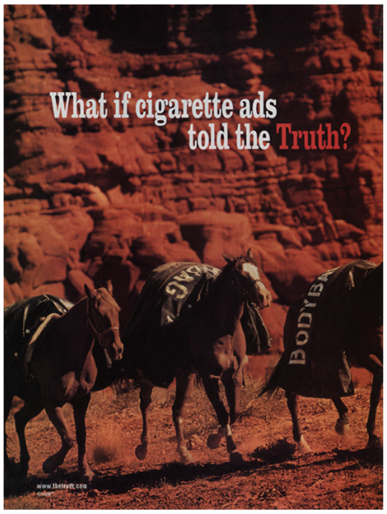
- The proliferation of local groups, hundreds of which sprouted up across the country.

- The success of salient direct-action campaigns on the local level. For example, in 1990 Black community leaders in Philadelphia, backed by a coalition of thirty-five local and national groups, formed the Coalition Against Uptown Cigarettes stopped the launch of "Uptown," a cigarette brand the R.J. Reynolds planned to market specifically to Black consumers (Blum and Carolan 2024).

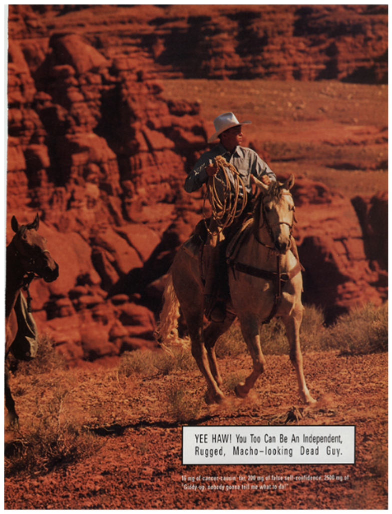
Generating Positive Feedback: The Fight for Narrative Control

Much of the fight to break the power of the tobacco industry oriented around shifting public narrative. Popular advertising campaigns featuring Joe Camel–a cartoon character that clearly targeted children and advertisements for "Virgina Slim" cigarettes targeting women were key features of the industry's push to expand their base of customers. These advertising campaigns were also fuel for the fire of anti-tobacco organizers, who used the industry's penchant for targeting positively constructed populations to grow the base of people willing to mobilize against them.

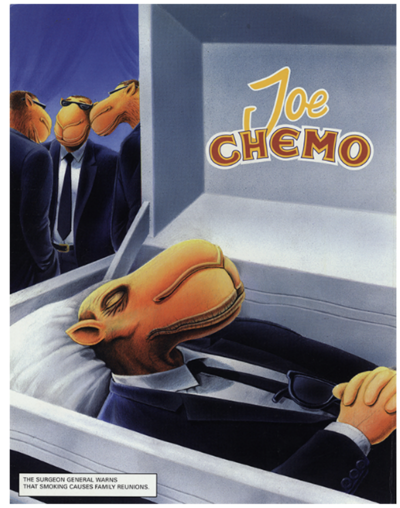
In the 1990s, organized groups used a wide variety of media tactics to grow support for the anti-smoking movement. Some groups deployed sarcasm in the context of popular cigarette advertisements, overlaying public health messages onto Marlboro cowboys or Joe Camels. Others used shock and fear as tools to sway the public, portraying smoke-damaged and diseased body parts to scare smokers. Even further, anti-smoking groups and coalitions mounted legislative campaigns and court cases focused on regulating marketing and advertising. These were strategies to weaken the public and narrative power of big tobacco. In the long term, declining narrative power held potential for a range of positive feedbacks: changing mass attitudes about smoking, drawing people into state and local organizing efforts, and raising the stakes and accountability for elected officials who colluded with or accepted campaign donations from big tobacco.



"What if cigarette ads told the Truth?" American Legacy Foundation (now the Truth Initiative), 2000. Part 1 of 2 page spread.



"What if cigarette ads told the Truth?" American Legacy Foundation (now the Truth Initiative), 2000. Part 2 of 2 page spread.



"Joe Chemo" spoof, *Adbusters*, 1996.

Challenges of Breaking Power: Counter Deconstruction and Backlash

Importantly, the tobacco industry did not rest on their laurels in the face of the significant efforts to break their power. They took steps to maintain power, leveraging the market, the state, and society to ensure that profits continued to flow. At the level of the market, they increased prices to offset consumer demand, shifted to global markets outside the US, and shifted to other products within the US (e-cigs/vaping). At the level of the state, they deepened and widened their investments in politics, including through lobbying, court cases, ballot initiatives, and state preemption policies (Crosbie and Schmidt 2020; Givel and Glance 2001; World Health Organization 2009). At the societal level, cigarette companies responded to regulations on advertising by shifting their marketing expenditures and approaches. As direct advertising to widen their customer base came under legal fire, they increased expenditures on price promotions and found other ways to continue drawing in customers without running afoul of legal restrictions (Levy et al. 2023; Ma, Reimold & Ribisl 2022).

The political fate of menthol cigarettes is a recent and striking example of the enduring power of big tobacco and the challenges of power deconstruction. Cigarettes infused with menthol create a cooling sensation in the mouth and throat, making them easier to inhale. The tobacco industry has aggressively marketed menthol cigarettes in Black communities (CDC 2024; Lee et al., 2015). This has produced pervasive, intense, and disproportionate harm in Black communities, where the vast majority of smokers (~80 percent) use menthol products and tobacco use is the number one cause of preventable death (approximately 45,000 Black people die from smoking related illness in the US each year). With this problem in mind, the FDA proposed a ban on menthol cigarettes in 2021. However, the ban never came to fruition. By 2024, the Biden administration abandoned their plans to ban menthol. The stated justification for not taking action to ban menthol revolved around opposition from civil rights and criminal justice organizations purporting to represent the interests of Black communities. Advocates from these institutions claimed that a ban on menthol would risk creating an illegal market for menthol cigarettes and thus subject Black communities to overpolicing. This line of reasoning amounted to using racism in the realm of criminal justice as a rationale for enabling the racially disparate harms of menthol. The ploy originated with the tobacco industry itself (Baumgaertner, Stockton and Lindsay 2022; Nirappil 2024). Evidence suggests that big tobacco influenced Black led organizations by funding them. For example, Reynolds American, the company that produces the top-selling menthol brand in the U.S., donated to Al Sharpton's National Action Network, to scholarships run by civil rights leaders, and to organizations representing Black law enforcement officials. Representatives of these very groups then opposed the menthol ban and pressured Biden officials to drop it. Notably, these are not grassroots groups that represent specific constituencies or have a wide member base. Instead, they are grasstops, elite led, well-heeled non-profit organizations with little accountability to specific communities. In this way, collusion between Black elites and the tobacco industry undermined a window of opportunity for eroding the power of the tobacco industries to perpetrate harm against Black people.

The menthol case underscores a broader point: while the anti-smoking movement won many victories, particularly in terms of lives saved, they did not halt the harm producing activities of big tobacco. This is not an indictment of power deconstruction, but it is a sobering indication of the ebb and flow of political contestation. In the absence of power deconstruction efforts, the harm of big tobacco would have been even more devastating. But even given consistent progress on the power deconstruction front, the backlash and dynamic contestation of elites constrained the scope and effectiveness of power deconstruction. This is precisely what we should expect given that power deconstruction is neither a short-term fix nor an immediate solution to specific ills. Instead, it is a medium to long-term process of shifting power relations that are otherwise readily reproduced.

These basic realities of power deconstruction prevail across domains. Our second case, private equity in housing, is different in terms of scale and power shifting processes. Even still, this case demonstrates both the possibilities of pursuing power deconstruction in the face of rampant harms and the dynamic contestation that follows from taking such a course.

Profit Versus Livelihood: Private Equity in Housing

Housing is a pillar of the American political economy from the vantage point of the wealthiest and most marginal alike— creating distinct interests that are difficult (if not impossible) to reconcile. For ordinary denizens, housing is a foundation for building and sustaining individual and collective life. Our housing circumscribes many of the intangible features of life (i.e. our attachment to place and sense of community) as well as highly tangible and material aspects of our health and wellbeing (our exposure to labor market risk, our exposure to mold and toxins, our access to drinkable water and refrigerated food). This is especially true in the context of the U.S. welfare regime– which provides comparatively minimal social protection. As a result, housing in the U.S. has become an especially important source of wealth and security for the affluent, and an especially major source of vulnerability for those rendered most marginal by racial capitalism in the U.S. (Beckert 2024), especially low-income Black and Latinx tenants[1] (Keene and Blankenship 2023; Michener 2023a).

For those with access to capital, however, housing represents a major site for profit extraction and wealth accumulation. On the global scale, asset markets– and housing markets in particular– represent *the preeminent domain* in which the share of income held by capital has increased relative to the share held by labor over the last half-century (Rognlie 2016; Piketty 2014). In other words, housing not only matters for the way people experience their place in the unequal distribution of wealth and income, it is also a major sector where those inequalities are produced.

These two broad categories of interests—profit on the one hand, livelihood on the other—are intuitively at odds (Raghuveer and Washington 2023). This is made especially clear in looking at the relationship between landlords and renters. A tenant's

[1] "Tenant" is often synonymous in popular discourse with "renter," and we use them interchangeably here to call attention to one specific kind of economic relationship. However, it is worth noting the discursive identity-building intervention made by tenant organizers with respect to this term. KC Tenants, one of the founding locals of the Tenant Union Federation discussed here, sees "tenant" as a broad political identity encompassing homeowners with a mortgage ("bank tenants") and unhoused denizens ("tenants at large") as well as those who rent their housing from a landlord.

livelihood relies on habitability and affordability, while a landlord interested in profit maximization has an incentive to raise rents as high as the market will allow and make as few repairs as existing legal frameworks will permit.[2,3] In a context of weak social protection and rental regulation, as well as a fragmented civil legal landscape that often privileges property owners (Hatch 2017; Michener and SoRelle 2026), landlords are maximally empowered to inflict harm. As studies of eviction and housing predation have extensively documented, this is especially true of landlords who rent to those on the political and economic margins, who are often at the floor of the rental market and have nowhere else to go (Desmond 2016; Rosen 2014; Garboden and Rosen 2019). Landlords thereby have a kind of tyrannical power in their relations with tenants, who have very little agency in determining their living conditions (Karp 2025).

With the growing penetration of the finance sector into the domain of housing, poor and working-class communities that make up the rental market floor are increasingly seen as lucrative investments—not only for traditional "mom and pop" landlords, but for large institutional investors, including Private Equity (PE) firms. These actors have been overtly privileged by fiscal policy (such as the Federal Reserve's policy of Quantitative Easing in the wake of the 2008 financial crash) and favored in markets where other investors are seen as less credit-worthy and less able to make large cash offers (Christophers 2023). Institutional investors also make use of favorable terms in loans from Government Sponsored Enterprises (GSEs), Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, for affordable housing development. Private Equity makes up a minority of the rental market writ large, but that share has grown more rapidly in recent years (Chilton 2023), as has the share of the largest multifamily housing owners in the U.S. who are backed by private equity (Vogell 2022). In certain rental housing sectors, PE landlords lead in evictions (Private Equity Stakeholder Project 2022)—a geography that is highly racialized (Fields and Raymond 2021). Poor tenants living in health-threatening housing have extremely limited mobility, while their landlords' portfolios increasingly stretch across geography—well outside the jurisdictional authority of any singular local or state government. In a highly decentralized federal system, corporate landlords' financial power thereby allows them to harm tenants with few repercussions.

Nevertheless, for many marginalized tenants, having "nowhere else to go" does not denote an intractable reality, it compels a political imperative. In a political economy where the scales of power dramatically favor those who see housing to maximize profit and accumulate wealth, tenants are developing strategies for building up their own

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[2] Not only in terms of the letter of the law, but also in terms of its actual enforcement.
[3] This is what Raghuveer and Washington (2023) term the "landlord-tenant contradiction."

collective power and deconstructing the power of (corporate) landlords. Such is the case of the ongoing organizing campaign pursued by the national Tenant Union Federation (TUF) against Capital Realty Group. This case helps to draw out tactics for breaking the power of such actors when the people harmed are diverse (racially and economically), diffuse (geographically), and face a disparate and difficult-to-identify target.

TUF's campaign against Capital Realty group began in the summer of 2025 and is ongoing. Partly for that reason, the account of their organizing campaign that we offer here is not a straightforward narrative illustrating the takedown of a powerful anti-democratic actor. Rather, this account serves to highlight emerging lessons scholars and practitioners can learn from organizers as this historic campaign unfolds. Moments during the campaign when Capital Realty has been enabled by existing legal and policy frameworks to quash the power of tenants (or maintain the status quo) are equally instructive. The former provides us a vantage point for examining strategies of power deconstruction, and the latter allows us to reflect on what exactly about the status quo permits the use and abuse of anti-democratic forms of power.

Capital Realty and the Operation of Corporate Landlord Power

Unlike large tobacco companies, PE landlords are able to maintain their power by hiding from view—a fundamental advantage with which tenant organizers are continually contending. In August of 2025, residents of Park Ridge Apartments—an affordable housing complex for seniors and people with disabilities in New Haven, CT—gathered for a press conference to announce the formation of the Park Ridge Tenant Union (Stone 2025). In doing so, they became an affiliated chapter of Connecticut Tenants Union (CTTU), one of five founding locals that make up the Tenant Union Federation (TUF). TUF had just begun a portfolio-wide organizing campaign against Capital Realty Group, the private equity firm and federally backed mortgage recipient to whom Park Ridge tenants were expected to pay rent despite overdue repairs and substandard living conditions. In joining the campaign, Park Ridge organizers were banding together with hundreds of other Capital Realty tenants in TUF-affiliated unions in Detroit, Louisville, and Kansas City (Tenant Union Federation [@tenantfed] 2025a).

This initial launch is indicative of the kind of playing field that marginalized tenants navigate when contending with the financial power of corporate landlords. At the conclusion of the press conference, Park Ridge organizers piled into a van and headed to confront their landlord with a list of their demands. They drove two hours to Rockland County, NY, where an apparently empty Capital Realty office awaited them, along with a note deliberately misdirecting them to a different empty building owned by Capital Realty CEO, Moshe Eichler. They drove to the other building and quickly realized they'd been duped. Upon returning to Capital Realty's office, they found the lights back on with employees inside, a locked door, and a tow truck threatening to remove their vehicles from the premises. They managed to slide a list of demands under the door, before leaving to avoid forced removal (Glesby 2025).

In the months following, TUF organizers have demonstrated the importance of tracking the scope of corporate landlord power and calling out Moshe Eichler, the president of Capital Realty group, for his negligence. They have made use of the institutional levers afforded by U.S. housing policy and federal financing and developed a federated organizational structure to confront a diffuse corporate target. In the context of a legal-policy environment that privileges property owners and renders tenants vulnerable, TUF organizers have begun to make demands that show promise for sustaining positive feedbacks. Perhaps above all else, deconstructing the power of Capital Realty has been coupled with strategies to build the power and capacity of marginalized tenants. Nevertheless, this case also illustrates the entrenched nature of corporate landlord power in a federated polity where the state grants wide discretion to private market actors in the domain of housing. U.S. institutions have in many ways stacked the deck in Capital Realty's favor, even as organizers have begun to develop a promising methodology for power deconstruction.

Identifying and Tracking Sources of Harm in a Financialized Context

Identifying PE landlords and mapping the scope of the harm they perpetrate has become increasingly difficult in a financialized context. This creates an information asymmetry that works to the landlord's advantage, as Capital Realty's attempted bait-and-switch on a group of elderly, low-income tenants illustrate. By acquiring property across locales and obscuring their reach using networks of LLCs, firms are well-positioned to evade accountability. When tenants seek redress for patterns of negligence that threaten their health and safety, it may be difficult to assess the size (and even location) of the party responsible. In turn, the challenge of apprehending the location and reach of one corporate actor makes it more difficult for tenants sending their rent to the same place to map out who they might build solidarity with. For these reasons, tenant organizers have been at the forefront of collecting data on parcel-level landlord holdings. Purchasing data from companies that maintain it for investment purposes can be prohibitively expensive for grassroots organizers (Shelton and Seymour 2024: 1819-1821). Despite these challenges, organizers have prioritized the "power shifting" step of identifying and tracking the holdings of Capital Reality[4].

The furtive financial power of Capital Realty Group is also enabled by the state via federally backed mortgages, Low Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTCs), Project-Based Section 8 vouchers, and Section 202 Supportive Housing subsidies. While affordable housing policy in the U.S. has never been fully public, the role of private actors in the ownership and management of government-subsidized housing has increased since the 1960s and 70s (Vale and Freemark 2019). In such an environment, and in the context of rising economic inequality, many people need affordable housing, and the state is heavily reliant on private landlords to provide it. This allows landlord advocacy groups to cast themselves as benign "affordable housing providers" vital for meeting communities' housing needs[5]. Moreover, the near absence of regulatory enforcement means that corporate landlords like Capital Realty receive government subsidies with minimal strings attached. According to an investigation by ProPublica, HUD has given passing inspection grades for years to buildings with black mold, rodent problems, peeling lead paint, or whose heat, air conditioning, and elevators are entirely dysfunctional (Parker 2018).

For these reasons, Capital Realty group is not only a necessary target— given the harm they inflict on poor tenants across the country in the name of profit— they also represent a *strategic opportunity*. Among many potential targets or viable campaigns, Capital Realty makes sense precisely because of their positioning within the larger political economy of housing. "Because Capital Realty Group is not the exception but rather the rule, they're a really important landlord for us to take on," TUF organizer and founder of KC Tenants, Tara Raghuveer, told *Bloomberg* (Capps 2025). Indeed, in taking on a modal target, TUF's campaign lays out a valuable framework for targeting similarly situated landlords and makes clear the role the state plays in permitting an abuse of power occurring across the low-income housing industry.

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[4] In a December 2025 instagram post, TUF describes Capital Realty Group as owning "at least 14,000 units of housing across 28 states" (Tenant Union Federation [@tenantfed] 2025b). The language of "at least," and the discrepancy between TUF's estimate and others (see Affordable Housing Finance 2025) is indicative of the information asymmetry we describe here.

[5] See, for instance, the National Multifamily Housing Coalition's summary of its goals and policy priorities: https://www.nmhc.org/advocacy/nmhc-primary-policy-priorities-and-goals/. For an extended discussion of using the term "landlord" as opposed to "housing provider," see Kerrigan (2024).

Institutional Levels: A Federated Structure to Confront Diffuse Power

TUF organizers have deployed a federated approach to both building and breaking power, allowing them to confront Capital Realty in the kind of arena that U.S. federalism facilitates. When Park Ridge organizers slid their list of demands under Capital Realty's door, they were acting in concert with other tenants as part of a coordinated resistance through TUF, an umbrella formation that supports and organizes regional tenant unions that in turn organize building-level tenant unions like Park Ridge. This strategy reflects the power shifting prerogative of determining pivotal institutional levers and levels. Such determinations require diagnosing where targets are situated in relationship to the structure of the polity, their economic position, and their scope of influence.

U.S. federalism is one major component of a veto-laden constitutional order that deprivileges under-resourced groups (such as those composed of poor racialized tenants) and privileges well-resourced minorities (Miller 2023; Grumbach and Michener 2022). In the domain of rental housing, states and localities play a critical role in regulating landlord-tenant relationships. While this has provided opportunities for tenant unions to create feedback loops that weaken the power of corporate landlords in particular municipalities[6], the policy tools available in any one state or locality are insufficient for deconstructing the power of a corporate landlord whose portfolio extends well beyond any state or local jurisdictional boundary. The same goes for local or state-specific organizing. A highly successful coordinated effort in one city or state would likely do little to prevent the landlord from harming tenants elsewhere— and might even incentivize Capital Realty to take its business to states where resistance is less likely. By confronting Capital Realty on all sides, TUF organizers have positioned themselves to transform the *nature of the power relationship* between the landlord and its tenants—rather than merely prompting Moshe Eichler to reconfigure the group's portfolio strategy.

TUF's federated structure is conducive to geographic breadth, but organizers are equally attentive to sustained organizational depth. With respect to power building, the kind of federated structure which guides TUF's organizing is geared toward longevity, and an attendant acknowledgement of the time horizon that forcing a large corporate actor to the table entails. Tara Raghuveer, in an interview with *Upstream*, characterized TUF's choice to start with five locals as a choice to build with "clarity and intention." In contrast to national-level "grasstops" advocacy efforts, TUF's strategy is built around organizing building-level tenant unions composed of members who know their

[6] Such as San Francisco's "Union at Home" ordinance, which formally recognizes tenant unions and takes steps to institutionalize collective bargaining between landlords and their tenants (Baltz 2024: 34)

neighbors. Members are thus better positioned to build up their individual and collective "capacities" (see Han, Campbell, and McKenna 2022) by engaging in activities like building-level union card drives and learning through experience how to work through challenges like language barriers in pursuit of wider coalitions.

This dual-sided nature of TUF-affiliated unions' power-building and deconstruction strategy (the coupling of strong organizing within each union and solidarity across unions) enabled them to secure major bargaining movement within a month of their initial launch. A union at a senior complex in Detroit, which launched just after Park Ridge, set a meeting to bargain with building management. Upon realizing that management did not intend to bargain in good faith, organizers began to walk out of that meeting, prompting Moshe Eichler himself to appear on the premises. An initial bargaining session was set— and the Detroit tenants informed Eichler that Connecticut would also be joining. That initial meeting resulted in a verbal commitment to recognize and bargain in good faith with *any tenant unions* within Capital Realty's portfolio and to sign a non-retaliation notice (Birmingham 2025).

Pathways to Produce Feedback: Power Deconstruction in the Shadow of the Law

The absence of a systematic legislative scheme defining the rights, responsibilities, and acceptable strategies for tenant organizing (such as the NLRA for labor unions) means that tenant unions are often organizing in the "shadow of the law" (Baltz 2024; 2025). Groups organizing against actors like Capital Realty are left to figure out how to pave structural pathways for entrenching power-deconstructing processes when clear state-sanctioned pathways are more-or-less absent. In this sense, the goals of TUF organizers are especially instructive. Rather than merely pressuring Moshe Eichler to address the extensive set of health and safety concerns enumerated by residents of Capital Realty-owned properties, tenants made the decision to focus on winning explicit promises of non-retaliation and collectively bargained lease agreements. By pressuring their landlord to institutionalize collective bargaining, TUF's campaign seeks to transform an individuating agreement which tenants typically have little to no say over (their lease), into a mechanism by which the collective has a say in tenant wellbeing.

Pressuring Capital Realty to agree to non-retaliation likewise indicates TUF organizers' attention to the possibility of positive feedbacks. Perhaps most importantly, non-retaliation diminishes a landlord's ability to use one of the most disruptive and inhumane tools at their disposal: the threat of eviction. It can also prevent landlords from raising tenants' rent or refusing maintenance to tenants engaged in organizing. While some low-income tenants are theoretically protected by HUD regulations (Gramlich 2011), and some state and municipal governments have laws protecting tenant organizers generally, the nature of protections available and the degree to which those protections are actually *enforced* varies widely (Hogue and Way 2023). These are precisely the legal-policy features of the landlord-tenant relationship that permit landlords to exercise wide discretion over tenants' day-to-day lives in tyrannical ways (Karp 2025). Given these power dynamics, a focus on securing non-retaliation at the portfolio level signifies attention not just to improving material conditions in the present but sustaining deep organizing moving forward by deconstructing the most intimate and insidious valence of corporate landlords' power.

Cultivating Narrative for Public Accountability: Media and Direct Action

TUF-affiliated tenant union launches are announced at press conferences much like the one in New Haven. Local news coverage in these instances allows tenants to leverage their landlord's absenteeism. Reporters interviewing tenants show footage and imagery of the living conditions they describe, while their landlord often cannot be reached for comment. This provides tenants with a platform for calling Capital Realty and Moshe Eichler out by name, creating a clear and visible juxtaposition between a *single* actor causing mass harm and a united front of *many* low-income tenants— who are often shown grouped together, sometimes arm-in-arm. In Kansas City, TUF helped to organize the simultaneous launch of three building-level tenant unions in September, which KCTV5 reported as the largest tenant union launch in Kansas City history. "You don't feel safe. You don't always feel clean," one resident told reporters— the interview clip appearing between images of water damage and mold, and videos of a KC Tenants organizer leading a group of tenants of a variety of ages and racial backgrounds in a chant. "You don't feel proud, you know, to have people come over, family come over. And that's not what home is about. Even though we rent and we get subsidies, these are our *homes*."

News coverage like this has been buttressed by coverage of KC Tenant organizing by national progressive watchdog publications like *In These Times*, *People's World*, and *More Perfect Union* (some of these stories being authored by tenant organizers themselves, i.e. Fousek 2025), as well as *Bloomberg*. This is part of a widespread media campaign which puts Capital Realty on the defensive. While the group has historically used platforms like YouTube to claim that they are committed to safeguarding the "affordability and quality" of multifamily low-income housing (Brian Dabney [@briandabney107] 2025), TUF's media strategy renders visible a wealth of evidence to the contrary and confronts the narrative of their landlord as a benign "housing provider" head-on.

Where media organizations are not on the scene, TUF organizers broadcast moments of coordinated direct action on social media— counterposing the imagery of a single powerful profiteer (Capital Realty, Moshe Eichler) against the imagery of tenants coming together across geography. A TUF Instagram post from December of 2025 shows a crowd of tenants outside Capital Realty headquarters with the phrase "CAPITAL REALTY ATTACKS, TENANTS FIGHT HARDER" overlaid across the first slide. The post details a series of verbal and physical attacks on TUF organizers by allegedly hired counterprotesters alongside an account of how the group not only persisted, but used the contentious setting to announce the launch of another union at a Capital Realty apartment complex in Denver. The post also depicts flyers hung near Capital Realty headquarters which display CEO Moshe Eichler's portrait alongside the firm's logo, alerting passersby that Capital Realty has over 34,000 units in 28 states and receives government funding, "but tenants live with mold, mice, trash, & roaches" (Tenant Union Federation [@tenantfed] 2025b]. Drawing attention in these ways is imperative when the firm perpetrating mass harm retains its power precisely by hiding its practices from view.

Institutional Levers: Tactical Deployment of Elite Actors

TUF organizers' media campaign and coordinated direct action has been periodically complimented by the tactical deployment of elite actors. In August of 2025, just weeks after Park Ridge organizers were stonewalled at their landlord's office, they held a press conference featuring U.S. Senator Richard Blumenthal (D-CT). Blumenthal called on Capital Realty to hear tenants' concerns. He contrasted the group's $750,000 in profit each year with the $500 to $750 they spend on maintenance per unit each year– an amount which he described as "way below standard." Senator Blumenthal committed to sending a letter reflecting the union's concerns along with U.S. Senator Chris Murphy (D-CT) and U.S. Representative Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) (Glesby 2025). Organized tenants of American Village apartments in Louisville have similarly enlisted U.S. Representative Morgan McGarvey (D-KY), who sent a letter to HUD Secretary Scott Turner in December of 2025 urging an investigation into Capital Realty Group (Munguia 2026).

These calls issued by elected officials highlight another way that Capital Realty serves as a strategic target for portfolio-wide organizing. Because the group's negligence and profiteering is enabled by government loans and subsidies, elected officials can leverage their position to call on the relevant government agency (in this case, HUD) to hold the state beneficiary to account. Additionally, while elected officials certainly participate in rallies and public-facing letter-writing to serve their own electoral interests, the evidence they draw on helps to substantiate and legitimate the public claims that TUF organizers have been leveling at their landlord.

Counter-Deconstruction Efforts by Capital Realty

As we saw in the case of tobacco, entrenched, elite power is not easily broken. Doing so takes time and sparks backlash. Since the launch of TUF last year, Capital Realty has embraced a variety of tactics long deployed by anti-union employers, including retaining an anti-union law firm, escalating retaliatory tactics at properties housing TUF-affiliated organizers, and launching a landlord-friendly tenants association (akin to a "company union") (Burns and Birmingham 2025). This has occurred despite HUD protections for tenants' rights to organize, which define legitimate tenant organizations as those that are independent of ownership or management.

Such counter-actions underscore the long-term and dynamic nature of power deconstruction. Contending with powerful corporate actors requires constant vigilance. Such vigilance is not always in service of overarching victories but is nonetheless necessary for actors with fewer resources to stay in the fight. At American Village Tenants Union in Kentucky, union organizers facing pervasive harassment by management—including abuse of access to tenants' homes, chains locking their community room, and illegal eviction threats—filed a complaint against Capital Realty in April of 2026 and secured a temporary restraining order, along with a judge's mandate that management provide 48 hours' notice to tenants before entering their homes. While such interventions may seem minor in the grand scheme of dismantling corporate power, they are necessary to ensure organizers' ongoing ability to build organizational power.

TUF's struggle against Capital Realty Group is ongoing, and in the meantime tenants at Capital Realty properties continue to face health-harming living conditions. Beyond this campaign, there is little sense that the financial power of PE landlords in the U.S. writ large has waned. This reflects a long series of political choices by the state, which has been largely deferential to the private market in the domain of housing, and continues to funnel resources to powerful economic actors like Capital Realty. Such a situation points to two features of power deconstruction. First, power may remain problematically imbalanced *even when some successful power deconstruction has taken place*. This is a product of the gross imbalances engendered by the structural features of the U.S. constitutional order, coupled with the context of racial capitalism. Second, there is unlikely to be a political economic order sufficiently proximate to our present in which continual, iterative, and constant power deconstruction is unnecessary. There may be significant wins along the way, but there is unlikely to be a utopic moment when continual struggle against health-harming actors is no longer required (as the resurgence of industry power in the case of Big Tobacco also aptly demonstrates).

However, while TUF's sustained grassroots struggle is indispensable to power deconstruction, regulators and policymakers could certainly more effectively aid organizers' efforts given the uphill nature of the battle at hand. TUF organizers have pointed in the past toward places where the state could reasonably intervene to enshrine tenant protections, including by tying rental protections to loan terms from GSEs. While some tenant rights were implemented under the Biden administration through the Federal Housing Finance Administration (and consequently rescinded), those protections were minimal and did nothing to alter the structural power dynamic between tenants and their government-sponsored landlords. Policymakers interested in leveling the playing field between antidemocratic actors like Capital Realty and the tenant organizers seeking to transform will need to think beyond mechanisms like 30-day notice requirements.

Conclusion

We have explored the dynamics of two very different cases of power deconstruction to glean insights that might be useful to organizers, government officials, and others positioned to oppose and break the power of dominant elites. As we conclude, we resist the impulse to focus extensively on policy recommendations. Doing so would attenuate the scope and depth of the lessons we can learn from the cases presented above because policy is downstream from power. With this in mind, we highlight key priorities, practices and (to a lesser extent) policies focused on facilitating the power of ordinary people and curbing the power of elites:

- Create mechanisms for information disclosure to facilitate the clear identification of harms (e.g., mandating that landlords disclose other properties in their portfolio as part of lease agreements).

- Create processes for sustained, iterative, and long-term dialogue between government actors (insiders) and grassroots actors (outsiders). There are no silver bullet policy gifts that government elites can bestow grassroots actors. Instead, institutionalize norms of ongoing contestation, struggle, collaboration and partnership— as inside and outside actors negotiate their (very different) roles in advancing and protecting democracy.

- Critically assess and take concrete steps to reorient relationships to actors who cause harm and have concentrated power (e.g., civil rights organizations relationships to big tobacco).

- Address unfulfilled asks that organizers have made of the state. What happened? How can this be different next time (e.g., increased rights and protections for tenants of properties with GSE-backed mortgages)?

- Facilitate institutional levers that engender grassroots power (e.g., collective bargaining rights for tenants at both the property and portfolio levels).

- Develop platforms for those most affected by harms to shape cultural and political narratives via legacy media, social media, legislative testimony, and strategic combinations of these and other venues.

- Enforce existing law, regulations, and policies with maximum severity in relation to harm inducing actors (e.g., union busting through retaliation in the case of tenant unions).

- Normalize, socialize and fund constant vigilance in the organizing sphere—irrespective of policy wins or losses. Anticipate an ebb and flow of political contestation to buffer against demoralization in the face of losses or complacency in the face of wins.

Louis Brandeis, an associate justice of the Supreme Court who famously opposed railroad monopolization and supported the antitrust movement, is credited with having insisted that, "we can have democracy in this country, or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can't have both." We agree. Concentrated economic and political power are antithetical to democracy. When and where such power is built, it must be routinely and relentlessly broken.

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