

Power to the People

Victories from the Last 6 Months

a Small Planet Institute F(AC)T Sheet with research by Reston Kaufman

Six months into the second Trump administration, our democracy seems to be eroding before our eyes. However, this mounting authoritarianism has been met with a burgeoning resistance movement. Increasingly, **citizens** are taking to the streets, **lawmakers** are speaking up, and powerful **interest groups** are fighting back. Americans are joining hands and **rising up** against Trump's destruction and lawlessness.

We know the power citizens hold—many cite the striking statistic that engaging only 3.5% of a population can bring about serious change. But even as the number of those resisting rises—with estimates of June 14th's #NoKingsDay protests at up to 5 million—there has been far too little mainstream media attention paid to this swelling movement. So, our aim here is to elevate stories of real progress across a number of fronts. The road ahead is long, but our power grows as more of us join. Let these stories fuel our fire as we share them far and wide.

"My voice is inadequate...but we the people are powerful"



Since Trump's inauguration, threats to our democracy have gone from shocking to routine. But the frustration doesn't end with Trump.

Early on, many were rightly angered by what felt like a leadership vacuum in the Democratic Party. In a February poll, an all-time low of 21 percent of voters approved of how Democrats in Congress are handling their jobs. A seemingly endless supply of headlines highlighted mounting anger. In Maryland and Michigan, citizens **packed town halls**, calling on their reps to take a more active stance. Even in Republican districts in North Carolina, Georgia and Florida turnout was high. Beyond these accountability checks, citizens took action by picking up their phones: According to one report from February, "The U.S. Senate phone system has been receiving around **1,600 calls each minute**, compared to the 40 calls per minute we usually receive."

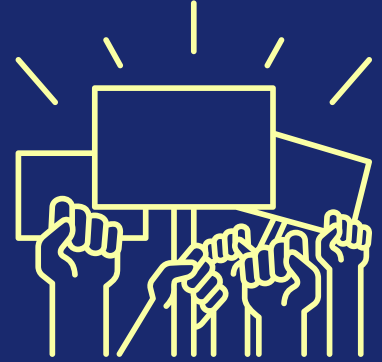
Then, amidst mounting citizen pressure on Democratic leaders, on March 31st, Sen. (D-NJ) Cory Booker stood on the Senate floor with the goal of speaking as long as he humanly could. Over the next 25 hours and 5 minutes, Booker told stories of those affected by the proposed Trump policies, showing how Trump's "policies are morally wrong" and "affect real people." In what would be the longest speech in Senate history—"in spite of" previous record holder Strom Thurmond's 24-hour filibuster against the Civil Rights Act—Booker used his voice to uplift both citizens and his peers in Congress.

Following Booker's protest, others in Congress have spoken out. Rep. (D-MA) Jake Auchincloss and Sen. (D-CT) Chris Murphy have been especially vocal. Sen. (D-MD) Chris Van Hollen's trip to visit Kilmar Abrego Garcia in El Salvador was yet another promising action by an elected official stepping up. **While more bold Democratic leadership is still desperately needed, thanks to direct citizen pressure, we are beginning to see it.**

Not an Oligarchy

We all know Elon Musk—CEO of Tesla, X, and SpaceX, and mega-donor to Trump. Musk—whose companies have over 50 contracts with the federal government—was infamously appointed to lead Trump's Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), which dismantled key federal institutions, including USAID, the EPA, the Department of Education, and many others.

Trump showed unwavering support for Musk's private businesses, notably holding a car show on the White House lawn. The showroom was likely a reaction to a grassroots movement already taking shape, protesting the administration's destructive actions and blatant conflicts of interest.



Indeed, Boston University Professor Joan Donovan had already sparked resistance. In February, she posted on Bluesky with #TeslaTakedown. Soon, dozens gathered outside a Tesla showroom to express their dissent. Over 50 more #TeslaTakedown events occurred on the first day and the movement grew into an organization. #TeslaTakedown supported countrywide protests and a national boycott of Tesla. The impact was immediate. Its first-quarter returns were abysmal. In the first three months of 2025, Tesla sales dropped 13 percent and revenue fell nearly 10 percent.

With Tesla shares continuing to fall, Musk backed away from his role in government and aired a personal, public disagreement with Trump. The impact of #TeslaTakedown is clear. Today, Musk is out of federal office with no plans to return.

Voters Take a Stand

Many voters have already begun to show their faltering trust in the Trump administration. In May, Lancaster County, PA, held a special state senate election with implications for political control in the statehouse. In the past, PA's 36th district has leaned Republican, notably voting for Trump by 15 points in 2024.

The two candidates were Republican Josh Parsons, a Trump backer, and his opponent, Democrat James Malone, who received little funding or attention until weeks before the election. Even with support from Musk and other national Republican figures, the voters in Lancaster County surprised the pollsters. The **dark-horse Democratic candidate, Malone, won**. The victory represented not only rising awareness of Trump's threats but also the impact of real grassroots advocacy in boosting turnout and reaching unlikely voters.

In another prominent state election—this time for the Wisconsin Supreme Court—the voice of the people once again rose to oppose Trump. Despite nearly \$30 million in personal donations from Musk, incumbent **Judge Susan Crawford kept her seat**, giving the Democrats a vital 4-3 advantage. Likewise, in an Iowan district that went in Trump's favor by 21 points in 2024, **a Democrat won!**

Voters are also shifting within the Democratic party. In the Democratic New York City mayoral primary, former **Governor Andrew Cuomo—once the clear favorite—lost to 33-year-old democratic-socialist assemblyman Zohran Mamdani**. Lacking a compelling vision for New York's future, Cuomo's campaign relied heavily on its funding and name recognition. On the other hand, Mamdani's campaign grew from knocking on over a million doors and sharing deliverable, optimistic policies for all New Yorkers.

Across these elections, a clear pattern emerges: Americans are rejecting the status quo. Through the vote, democracy can still deliver; and when we all participate, we can achieve remarkable outcomes.

Let's Silence All the Lawyers... Or Just the Ones I Don't Like

A staple in authoritarians' playbooks: Attack judges and lawyers. And indeed, Trump has targeted a number of law firms, whose work stood in his way, threatening to disclose private information to the government, exclude them from federal contracts, and bar them from future government positions.

These firms *did* have an out: Many firms made agreements with the Trump administration in exchange for immunity, offering, for example, pro bono work for Trump and his cronies. In defiance, a handful of attorneys from major law firms resigned from their roles. But their action did not change the fact that many of these major law firms acquiesced.



However, 3 firms did challenge Trump's actions, standing up to what they saw as an unconstitutional misuse of power. **Fittingly, they filed a lawsuit. Over 500 other firms signed in support. And, they won.**

Even without the support of the nation's largest law firms, these groups banded together to fight injustice. Through democratic organizing and legal defense, they proved yet again that when we fight, we can win.

Academic Freedom Must Stay Free

Trump has launched a blatantly aggressive campaign against public and higher education. From dismantling the Department of Education to attacking 'DEI', he has curbed academic independence. But this was escalated when he issued ultimatums to universities, threatening to cut billions in federal funding.

In March, the Trump administration withheld \$400 million in federal grants to Columbia University, issuing a list of demands to be met in order to receive their federal funding. With critical funding on the line, Columbia obliged.

These changes did not go without external and internal pushback. At Columbia, over 50 faculty members protested. Outside the university, higher educational organizations concurred. The American Association of University Professors and the Faculty Members' Union filed a lawsuit. Academics spoke out at town halls. Critics dissented, arguing the attacks were an unprecedented overstep of executive authority.

Trump then extended his "demands" to the oldest and wealthiest school in the nation: Harvard. **But this time, they resisted.** The Trump administration pulled \$2.2 billion in federal grants and threatened more cuts. Nonetheless, the college has continued to fight, claiming these demands violate the First Amendment. The school's lawyers have built a **lawsuit that has been backed by more than 50 other colleges**, advocacy groups and associations. On campus, unions and student organizations held a rally to support the school's researchers. And the College's President has repeatedly stated that the university "will not surrender its independence," while continuing to promote academic freedom.

In May, Harvard was restricted from the Student and Exchange History Information System, essentially disallowing the school from enrolling international students. Days later, hundreds of students, faculty, and local residents protested on Harvard's campus. At the same time, the school's administration continues to battle Trump in court. The efforts of Harvard's lasting resistance reveal the limits of Trump's authority, as people continue to defend First Amendment—and academic—freedoms.