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Democracy in Chains Summary

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Content

Democracy in Chains Exposes Our Current Crisis and How to Solve It

The survival of the planet is now at a critical point. We are experiencing record heat, record wildfires, record hurricanes, record drought--as fossil-fuel oligarchs fund many of the organizations blocking climate change action. Their long-range, stealth plan is to transform the U.S. so that there are no constraints on the burning of fossil fuels. Historian Nancy MacLean's book, *Democracy in Chains* is a detailed history of their movement and endgame.

In the introduction, MacLean writes about the early 2010s, when something "extraordinarily troubling entered American politics" – from Gov. Scott Walker's undermining public unions,

Gov. Chris Christie's attacks on public education, synchronized proposals to suppress voter turnout, the all-out attempts to defeat the Affordable Care Act, and vicious, unprecedented nationwide partisanship. Jane Mayer wrote in 2010 about the Koch brothers "war against Obama" with *Dark Money*. But it wasn't until MacLean unearthed Nobel prize-winning economist James Buchanan's papers, shortly after his death, that we were able to see the "master plan behind all these assaults."

MacLean's detailed *Democracy in Chains* is not based on conjecture or speculation. Buchanan was a radical libertarian and his papers included his correspondence with Charles Koch and their joint plans for the U.S. One quarter of her carefully researched book is endnotes, documenting the abundant sources that support her account.

In the 1990s Charles Koch started working more closely with Buchanan, to convert his vision of the U.S. to a reality – a "free" society where there would be few limits on how the wealthy could make money and where there would be great restraints on the government asking for that money for any purpose – except for the courts, police, and military. (All of which would likely have to be expanded because so many people would be angry.)

As MacLean writes, it is "the utterly chilling story of the ideological origins of the single most powerful and least understood threat to democracy today: the attempt by the billionaire-backed radical right to undo democratic governance."

Their vision of the U.S. is stark. They don't think the government should provide free public education, Social Security, Medicare, food stamps, toll-free roads, and clean water and air. Most people wouldn't vote for this vision of the U.S., so voter suppression is a key part of their plan. More than 400 voter suppression bills were introduced in state legislatures from 2011 to the present.

Almost every problem U.S. citizens face has connections to organizations in the Koch network. Whether it's the U.S. response to Covid-19, defunding the CDC, demonstrations against masks, lawsuits against governors with mask mandates, increases in college tuition, or defunding public education, there are usually Koch groups involved. . The attacks on labor unions. Right-to-work laws. Laws to criminalize protest. Attempts to defund mass transit. Aggressive gerrymandering. Private prisons. Even the uproar over Critical Race Theory is being promoted by Koch-funded groups. This uproar smears public education and is highly distracting at a time when schools need help containing the pandemic. The "Kochtopus" chart --with its links to so many organizations--gives some sense of the scale of their efforts. Though they present themselves as independent, the groups work together in a coordinated fashion.

MacLean writes that the Koch network's "most important stealth move" was "to wrest control over the machinery of the Republican Party, beginning in the late 1990s... The old Republican Party exists no more… The Republican Party is in the control of a group of true believers for whom compromise is a dirty word." They don't want effective government – they want people to see the government as broken, corrupt, and not capable of delivering services or running the country. They want public services and resources privatized so that corporations can profit even more.

Senators Joe Manchin and Krysten Sinema both have Koch ties and are blocking important Voting Rights and infrastructure bills – bills that a clear majority of people want. Manchin was the state chair for the Koch group ALEC (American Legislative Exchange Council) when he was a state representative. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce (which receives Koch money) has rewarded Manchin and Sinema for their stands against President Biden's policies.

Two recent Koch-supported justices, Amy Coney Barrett and Brett Kavanaugh, assured that the Supreme Court voted to uphold the Arizona voter suppression laws, effectively gutting what remained of the landmark 1965 Voting Rights Bill and paving the way for the acceptance of some of the hundreds of Koch bills to restrict the vote now in state legislatures.

This critical time for the planet is also a critical time for democracy. The Capitol Insurrection on January 6 was not simply a protest that got out of hand. It was a serious coup attempt. UnKoch My Campus published a report on the Koch network's role in helping fund and organize it. The voter suppression bills now in state legislatures are blatant attempts to win the next election by disenfranchising millions of voters.

The Koch endgame is an Article V Constitutional Convention to permanently transform the U.S. They now have 28 of the 34 state legislatures' approvals needed for a constitutional convention. Buchanan was an advisor to Pinochet when Chile rewrote their constitution in 1980. It has taken the Chilean people 40 years—and the 2019 uprising in which 29 protesters lost their lives--to gain the power to rewrite their Constitution.

MacLean's message to us all is to mobilize: to get everyone involved in strengthening democracy. We can't make progress on climate change or national anti-racism reform or peace or labor laws or healthcare if we don't have a functioning democracy. Environmental groups, peace organizations, labor unions, veteran and church groups – all of us have to work together against this multi-pronged threat. She encourages us to get involved in this necessary work in a way that is fulfilling for each of us. "This could be an incredibly inspiring moment of democratic renewal - like Reconstruction after the Civil War and the New Deal and the 1960s. We need many more people to get involved to make sure it's one of these incredibly positive moments of transformation!"