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THE REPUBLIC AND THE AMERICAN PRESENT

In place of philosopher-kings they built a machine.

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I

The claim

In the summer of 1814 Thomas Jefferson wrote to John Adams that he had just finished reading the *Republic* and found it “the heaviest task-work I ever went through” (Jefferson 1814). Adams answered that he could hardly avoid the suspicion that Plato had intended the book as a satire on republican government (Adams 1814). Neither man admired the dialogue. Both had spent their lives building a government designed to escape its conclusion. That is the relationship between the *Republic* and the American constitutional order: not admiration but rebuttal. The founders inherited, through Polybius, Aristotle, and Montesquieu, the argument Plato started in Book VIII, that democracy destroys itself through its own love of freedom and ends in the rule of a popular champion. They accepted the diagnosis and rejected the cure. In place of philosopher-kings they built a machine.

The argument of this essay follows from that history. The United States is not a democracy, and this is a deliberate feature rather than an unfinished reform. Its structure was engineered against the specific failure Plato described, and over the past two years that structure has done the work it was built for. The danger in 2026 is not that the machine has failed at the task it was built for. It is that it was never built for the failures now eroding it: influence bought at a scale the founders could not imagine, checks held by officials who decline to use them, and a culture that no longer knows what the safeguards are for and increasingly reads them, from both sides of the political divide, as obstructions to be cleared. Plato’s warning was never about institutions; it was about the citizen who wants freedom without judgment and a champion without accountability (562e–563d, 565c). The founders could design against that citizen. They could not design him out of existence, and the polling of the past year suggests he is back.

II

The argument of the *Republic*

Because the essay draws on the *Republic* selectively, the shape of the whole should be set out first. The dialogue is a single sustained answer to a challenge posed in its opening books. Thrasymachus asserts that justice is nothing but “the advantage of the stronger,” the rules the powerful impose to serve themselves (338c). Glaucon sharpens the challenge with the story of Gyges’ ring: give a man the power to act unseen, and he will do whatever he can get away with, which suggests that people are just only because they fear being caught (359c–360d). He asks Socrates to prove that justice is worth having for its own sake, apart from reputation and reward (358b–d). Everything that follows is an attempt to meet that demand.

Socrates answers by building a city “in speech,” on the theory that justice will be easier to read in large letters than in small (368d–369a). The

city he constructs has three classes, producers, auxiliaries, and rulers, and it is just when each does its own work and none meddles in another's (433a-434c). The soul, he argues, has the same three parts, appetite, spirit, and reason, and the just person is one in whom reason rules, spirit enforces its rule, and appetite obeys (441d-442d). Justice, on this account, is not a set of rules but a condition of order, and injustice is faction, in the soul as in the city (444b).

Books V through VII contain the dialogue's most radical proposals and its central images. The rulers are to hold property and family in common (416d-417b, 457c-d), women are to be eligible for every office (455d-456a), and the city can be brought into being only if philosophers become kings or kings philosophers (473c-e). To explain what a philosopher knows, Socrates offers the analogy of the sun, the image of the divided line, and the allegory of the cave (507b-518b). The cave is the *Republic's* account of ordinary political life: prisoners chained to face a wall, mistaking shadows for things, and hostile to anyone who returns from the light to tell them so (514a-517a). It is also the passage from which Book VI's images of the ship and the great beast draw their force. A public that has seen only shadows will reward the man who describes the shadows best.

Books VIII and IX are the part of the dialogue this essay relies on. Having described the just city, Socrates describes how it decays through four inferior regimes, each with a corresponding type of person: timocracy, ruled by honor; oligarchy, ruled by wealth; democracy, ruled by freedom; and tyranny, in which the champion of the people becomes their master (543a-576b). The sequence is not a prediction about any particular city. It is an argument that each regime carries within it the appetite that produces the next, and that the last stage answers Glaucon's challenge: the tyrant, who can do anything he wants, is shown to be the most enslaved and miserable of men (576b-580c). The unjust life, in other words, is not worth having even when it goes unpunished.

Book X closes the dialogue in two moves. Socrates banishes imitative poetry from the city on the ground that it feeds the passions and imitates appearances rather than truth (595a-608b), and he ends with the myth of Er, in which souls choose their next lives and bear the consequences of the choice (614b-621d). The moral of the myth is that the only thing that finally matters is the knowledge that lets a person choose well. It is a fitting close to a book that began by asking whether justice pays. Plato's answer is that the question is misconceived: the just soul is its own reward, and the city that produces it is a model "laid up in heaven" that may never exist anywhere but in the person who founds it in himself (592a-b). The founders read the political books and left the metaphysics alone. The essay follows their example.

III

What Plato said would happen

Plato's case against democracy rests on three mechanisms, and each is stated precisely enough to be tested. The first concerns opinion. In Book VI he compares those who claim to understand the public to a keeper who has learned "the moods and appetites of a huge, strong beast" and calls that knowledge wisdom, though he "knows nothing about which of these beliefs and appetites is fine or shameful" (493a-c). The keeper's art is accommodation. He calls good whatever the beast enjoys, and in a democracy his is the only art that pays. The companion image is the ship whose sailors fight over the helm and dismiss the one man who studies the stars as a useless stargazer (488a-489a). Both images make the same point: a public that governs by appetite cannot recognize competence, and will reward those who flatter it over those who could steer.

The second mechanism concerns law. Democracy has one good, freedom, and its "insatiable desire" for that one thing is what undoes it (562b-c). Plato's catalogue of the late democratic city is a list of authorities that no longer bind: fathers who fear their sons, teachers who flatter students, and a citizenry that treats written and unwritten law alike as something to obey only when it agrees (562e-563d). The city does not become lawless. It becomes a place where every law is provisional and every institution is trusted only by those who happen to like its current output.

The third mechanism concerns the champion. The people "always set up one man as their special champion" and nurture his greatness (565c). He begins by accusing his enemies and bringing them before the courts (565e-566a), then asks the people for a bodyguard, which they grant because they fear for him more than for themselves (566b). Once secure, he keeps the city in need of him by "always stirring up some war" (566e-567a), and finally purges anyone "brave, proud, wise, or rich" (567b-c). Plato's tyrant is not an invader. He is the democracy's own creature, produced by the appetite for freedom and the collapse of shared authority that preceded him. This is the sequence the founders read, in one form or another, and set out to interrupt.

IV

The founders' answer: a republic, on purpose

The word "democracy" does not appear in the Constitution. What the document guarantees to every state is "a Republican Form of Government" (U.S. Const. art. IV, § 4), and the distinction was not casual. Madison drew it explicitly in *Federalist* No. 10, defining a pure democracy as a small society in which citizens assemble and govern in person, and observing that such governments "have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention." A republic, in his sense, is a government in which "the scheme

of representation takes place,” and its advantages are two: it refines public opinion by passing it through a chosen body, and it can extend over a territory large enough that no single faction can command a majority (Madison 1787a). In No. 55 he put the point in Plato’s own terms: even if every Athenian citizen had been a Socrates, every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob (Madison 1788a). The founders were not building a democracy that happened to have some filters. They were building filters and calling the result a republic.

Each of Plato’s three mechanisms has a corresponding structural answer. Against the great beast, the design interposes distance: representation rather than assembly, a Senate intended as a defense “against their own temporary errors and delusions” (Madison 1788b), and originally an indirect method of choosing both senators and the president. Hamilton defended the Electoral College precisely as a screen against men whose gifts were “talents for low intrigue, and the little arts of popularity” (Hamilton 1788a). Against the erosion of law, the design makes the fundamental law extraordinarily hard to change. Pew’s comparative analysis finds the U.S. Constitution the second hardest to amend among 101 democracies, formally amended twenty-seven times in 237 years (Pew Research Center 2026). That rigidity is often presented as a defect. Read against Book VIII, it is the point: a democracy that cannot rewrite its constitution on the strength of one election cannot dissolve its own authorities in the manner Plato describes.

Against the champion, the design is most elaborate. Power is divided among three branches, and the division is enforced not by virtue but by rivalry. “Ambition must be made to counteract ambition,” Madison wrote, so that “the interest of the man” is tied to “the constitutional rights of the place” (Madison 1788c). The president serves a fixed term, may be removed by Congress, commands an army that Congress alone can fund, and is bound by courts that Hamilton called the “least dangerous” branch precisely because they possess neither the sword nor the purse (Hamilton 1788b). Where Plato tried to prevent tyranny by producing rulers wise enough not to want it, the founders assumed rulers would want it and built a structure in which wanting it would not be enough. “If men were angels, no government would be necessary” (Madison 1788c). The whole design is a wager that the citizen Plato described will keep appearing, and that the machine can hold him.

This is what it means to say the United States is not a true democracy by design. The features most often criticized as undemocratic, the Senate, the Electoral College, life-tenured judges, a supermajority amendment process, are not residue the founders failed to clear away. They are the parts of the machine that answer Plato.

The hole in the machine: money after *Citizens United*

Plato's sequence has a stage the essay has so far passed over, and it is the one the founders guarded least well. Before democracy comes oligarchy, the city in which "the more they value money, the less they value virtue" (550e), in which office is effectively conditioned on wealth (551a-b), and which therefore becomes "of necessity two cities, one of the poor and one of the rich" (551d). Democracy in Plato's account is the revolt of the second city against the first, and the champion of Book VIII is raised by the people specifically against the rich (565b-c). Wealth is not incidental to the decline. It is the pressure that starts it.

Madison saw this clearly. The "most common and durable source of factions," he wrote, has always been "the various and unequal distribution of property" (Madison 1787a), and he insisted that representatives be chosen by "not the rich, more than the poor" (Madison 1788d). But the structural answer he gave to property was the same one he gave to every faction: the extended republic. Spread the country wide enough and no interest can coordinate a national majority. That cure assumed coordination was expensive. A super PAC is a machine for making it cheap.

The legal architecture is recent and precise. In *Citizens United v. FEC*, decided January 21, 2010, a five-justice majority held that the government may not restrict independent political expenditures by corporations and unions, on the reasoning that expenditures made independently of a candidate "do not give rise to corruption or the appearance of corruption" (558 U.S. 310, 357). Two months later the D.C. Circuit applied that logic to contributions, holding in *SpeechNow.org v. FEC* that limits on giving to groups that make only independent expenditures were likewise unconstitutional (599 F.3d 686). The super PAC, a committee that may raise and spend without limit provided it does not formally coordinate with a campaign, is the product of those two decisions. The relevant point for this essay is who made them. The check on money that Congress had built in the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 was removed not by a champion or a mob but by the branch Hamilton called least dangerous. Madison's machine assumed the branches would obstruct one another. It did not anticipate one branch dismantling a check the others had agreed to.

Whether that reasoning is faithful to the First Amendment is the real question, and the case that it is not is strong. The amendment protects speech. It says nothing about the purchase of amplification, and the founders who wrote it did not think of corruption as a narrow matter of bribes exchanged for votes. As Zephyr Teachout has shown, they used the word to describe any arrangement in which public officers came to depend on private interests, and they wrote the Constitution's emoluments, appointment, and eligibility clauses to prevent dependence rather than

merely exchange (Teachout 2014). Madison's insistence that representatives answer to "not the rich, more than the poor" is a claim about dependence. The *Citizens United* majority replaced that conception with a far narrower one, in which corruption means only an explicit quid pro quo, and then held that money spent independently cannot produce it. Justice Stevens, writing for four justices, answered that the founders would not have recognized the majority's definition, and that a republic cannot function once its citizens believe its laws are for sale (558 U.S. at 393, Stevens, J., dissenting). On the founders' own understanding of the term, the decision did not interpret the First Amendment so much as amend it.

The connection to public distrust is not conjecture. In Pew's 2023 study of attitudes toward the political system, references to money and corruption were among the most frequently volunteered criticisms; 80 percent of adults said campaign donors have too much influence over Congress, 70 percent said the people in their own districts have too little, 63 percent believed most or all officials ran for office to make money, and 72 percent wanted limits on spending, with nearly identical majorities of Republicans and Democrats (Pew Research Center 2023). By May 2026 a majority of Americans, including majorities of both 2024 candidates' voters, agreed that special-interest campaign spending is itself a form of corruption (The Hill 2026). No other complaint about the system commands that breadth of agreement. Whatever else the American public disputes, it agrees that its representatives answer to donors before constituents, and that belief is Plato's definition of the oligarchic city stated in survey form.

The scale of what followed is a matter of record. Outside groups spent more than \$4.46 billion in the 2024 federal cycle, nearly double the 2020 figure (OpenSecrets 2024), and in the presidential race alone outside spending passed \$1.1 billion before Election Day (NBC News 2024). The pattern is bipartisan and structural rather than personal: in the 2022 midterms the largest single outside spenders were super PACs aligned with congressional party leadership, each disbursing roughly \$200 million, and outside groups together spent \$1.9 billion (Bloomberg 2022). The current cycle is on the same trajectory. By March 1, 2026, advertising in House and Senate races had reached \$565 million, with outside groups responsible for more than 60 percent of it (Wesleyan Media Project 2026). Industries now fund super PACs to shape the regulation of their own sector: a committee financed by artificial intelligence firms has announced plans to spend \$125 million on the 2026 midterms, backing candidates of both parties, and won its first three primaries (Axios 2026). The relevant fact is not which party benefits in a given cycle. It is that the price of a national voice has risen to a level only a few hundred people and firms can pay, and that both parties' champions are now selected, in part, by the same small class of payers.

The defenses of the decision deserve to be stated, if only to show how little they meet this point. The majority held that restricting political spending

is itself a danger to self-government and that the remedy for distrusted speech is more speech. But the harm the polling records is not that Americans hear too little; it is that they have concluded the hearing does not matter. The empirical effect of money on outcomes is also less certain than the totals suggest, since in 2024 the losing presidential candidate was the subject of the larger share of outside spending (NBC News 2024). That objection, too, misses the injury. Money need not decide elections to corrode a republic. It need only convince the governed that it does.

What the United States has, then, is something Plato's model did not anticipate and Madison's did not prevent: the fusion of the two cities. In Book VIII the champion rises against the rich, and that opposition keeps oligarchs and demos from combining. When each side's champion is financed by a handful of the largest fortunes in the country, the opposition Plato relied on has collapsed, and the interest Madison hoped scale would fragment has instead concentrated behind whichever figure the donors have chosen to elevate. Checks and balances depend on interests that diverge. A regime in which the popular champion and the largest fortunes share a treasury, on both sides of the aisle, has removed that divergence at the source, through a door the courts opened, over the objection of nearly three-quarters of the people the courts serve. It is the place in the design where the founders' wager has been called and lost, and it is the failure the public names first when asked what is wrong.

VI

The champion on both sides

Plato's champion is not a party phenomenon, and the essay would be dishonest if it treated him as one. The mechanism at 565c–566b is symmetrical: a people that has stopped trusting its institutions looks for a person to trust instead, and it chooses that person for the enemies he promises to fight. What makes the champion dangerous is not his platform but the transaction. The people grant him power in proportion to their fear, and he keeps the fear alive because it is the source of the grant (566b, 566e–567a). Every faction in a late democracy can run this transaction, and in a two-party system both do.

The symmetry is visible in the data. Trust in the executive branch is not a stable attitude toward an office; it is an attitude toward whoever holds it. Among supporters of the president's party, whichever party that is, trust in the executive branch has averaged 87 percent this decade; among opponents it has averaged 7 percent, and the gap between them has grown from 26 points in the 1970s to 80 (Jones 2025). What that pattern describes is a public that wants the presidency strong when its side holds it and weak when the other side does, which is to say a public that wants a champion rather than an office. The same reversal appears in confidence in

the Supreme Court, the military, and the news media, each of which is now trusted chiefly by the party that expects it to rule its way (Saad 2026).

The fear that feeds the champion is likewise bipartisan. In 2016 Pew found that 55 percent of Democrats said the Republican Party made them afraid and 49 percent of Republicans said the same of the Democratic Party (Pew Research Center 2016). By 2022, 72 percent of Republicans described Democrats as more immoral than other Americans and 63 percent of Democrats said the same of Republicans, both figures roughly double what they had been six years earlier (Pew Research Center 2022). This is the precondition Plato specifies. A champion cannot be raised by a people that regards its opponents as mistaken; he can only be raised by a people that regards them as a threat. Madison saw the same thing when he wrote that factions were more “disposed to vex and oppress each other” than to cooperate for the common good (Madison 1787a). Each side’s champion is the other side’s best argument, and the two sustain one another the way Plato’s champion and his enemies do.

The promises differ in content and agree in form. One version of the champion promises equity: to redistribute, to restructure the counter-majoritarian institutions, to correct historical wrongs by direct action. The other promises order: to restore strength, to override the officials and courts that obstruct, to act where the ordinary process has failed. Plato’s champion makes both promises. He hints at cancelling debts and redistributing land (566a) and he stirs up wars so that the people will need a leader (566e). The common element is the removal of obstacles between a will and its object, and the obstacles in question are precisely the ones the founders built. Neither champion proposes to strengthen the Senate, slow the amendment process, or make the courts more independent of the outcome. Both propose, in their own vocabulary, to make the machine answer faster to the side that currently holds it.

This is where scale enters. Madison’s extended republic was meant to keep any single faction from commanding a national majority, because factions were local and coordination across a continent was hard (Madison 1787a). National money and national media have abolished that difficulty. A super PAC can be funded in one city and spend in fifty states; a feed can deliver the same grievance to every district at once. The result is that nearly every contest, down to school boards, is now fought as a proxy for the national one, and the champion on each side becomes the organizing figure for every local quarrel. Madison’s cure depended on fragmentation. The information and money systems of the present century are, before anything else, machines for eliminating it. The founders’ obstacles remain in place. What has changed is that both sides now experience them as the enemy’s weapons, and the demand to remove them has become the one thing on which the two champions agree.

VII

When the guardians stop guarding

Section IV describes the checks as though they were reliable, and that description conceals an assumption. A check is not a mechanism. It is a person, a governor or a judge or a county supervisor, who decides on a given day to do the thing the office requires. Plato understood that the structure of a city fails from the inside before it fails from the outside. His guardians are chosen and trained precisely because power corrupts those who hold it, and his fear is not that they will be overthrown but that they will turn on the citizens “like wolves” rather than protecting them like dogs (416a–b). The democratic city of Book VIII has a related pathology: men condemned by its own courts “stroll around” in public as though no one cared, because the officials charged with enforcement have stopped enforcing (558a). And the oligarchic city’s rulers decline to restrain conduct that enriches them, since enforcing the law would cost them money (555c). In each case the law survives on paper and dies in the officer.

The founders knew this too, and it is why they did not rely on virtue. “Enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm,” Madison wrote (Madison 1787a), and the government had to be obliged “to control itself” through “auxiliary precautions” beyond mere dependence on the people (Madison 1788c). The precaution they chose was redundancy. A judge sits over a county board, an appellate court over the judge, a state over its counties, a federal court over the state. The design does not assume every officer is honest. It assumes their failures will not all point the same way at once.

Redundancy protects against random failure. It does not protect against the quiet form of capture, in which officials across several offices decline at once to enforce a rule they still formally hold. This form does not look like a coup. It looks like an oversight body that does not meet, a prosecutor who does not charge, a court that does not enforce its own judgment, a city that instructs its police to ignore a category of offense. No order is defied, because no order is issued. A distinction is needed here, since refusing to act can be a legitimate check as well as a dereliction. The test is whose power the refusal restrains. An officer who refuses to carry out another branch’s unlawful demand is checking someone else’s authority, which is what the design intends. An officer who declines to enforce the law of his own office against conduct his side prefers not to punish is exempting himself and his allies from the law, which is what the design forbids. The first is a guardian. The second is Plato’s wolf in the uniform of a dog.

The past decade’s experiments in nonenforcement belong to the second category, and they deserve careful description because they were adopted openly and for stated reasons. The reasons were the language of equity: that enforcement of theft and drug laws fell disproportionately on the poor and on minority communities, that incarceration for low-level offenses

did more harm than the offenses, and that justice should be measured by aggregate outcomes across groups rather than by the desert of the individual act. Whatever the merit of those aims, the mechanism they produced is the one Plato describes at 558a. The law remained on the books; the officials charged with enforcing it stopped; and the citizen whose shop was emptied or whose car was stripped learned that the state's compassion for the offender had been purchased with his loss. Plato's definition of justice is that each person should have and do what is his own (433a–434c). His objection to democracy is that it “dispenses a sort of equality to equals and unequals alike” (558c). A justice administered by group outcome rather than individual act is that objection stated as policy, and the citizen on the receiving end does not need to have read Book VIII to recognize it.

The West Coast supplies the clearest record, because there the experiments were run at full scale and then reversed by the same electorates that had authorized them. In 2020 Oregon voters decriminalized possession of hard drugs; by 2024 the legislature had recriminalized it on lopsided bipartisan votes, and state officials reported that only 7 percent of those cited under the decriminalization regime had completed the addiction screening the law had promised in place of prosecution (OPB 2024; Oregon Criminal Justice Commission 2025). In California a decade under Proposition 47, which made theft under \$950 a misdemeanor regardless of prior record, ended in 2024 when 71 percent of voters restored felony exposure for repeat offenders (NBC Los Angeles 2024). Nationally, reported crime has fallen sharply, with violent crime down 9.3 percent and property crime down 12.4 percent in 2025 (FBI 2026), and the essay does not claim otherwise. But the rate of crime and the rate of enforcement are different measures, and it is the second that concerns Plato: in 2025 police cleared 47.4 percent of reported violent crimes and 17.4 percent of reported property crimes, meaning more than four in five reported thefts and acts of destruction ended without an arrest (Baltimore Sun 2026). Researchers dispute how much of the West Coast's visible disorder the enforcement policies caused, as against fentanyl and the pandemic (Portland State University 2025), and the downtown cores of Portland and San Francisco, which recorded the highest office vacancies in their history, lost their commuters first to remote work (Portland Metro Chamber 2026; Kidder Mathews 2026). The causal apportionment can be argued. What cannot be argued is the verdict of the voters, who concluded in both states that officials had used the language of compassion as a reason not to act, and who took the law back into their own hands by ballot. That is the democratic city correcting itself, which Plato did not think possible. It is also evidence of how far the guardians had let it go before the correction came.

The failure of oversight at scale is best documented in the pandemic relief programs. The Government Accountability Office estimates that fraud

in unemployment insurance alone during the pandemic ran between \$100 billion and \$135 billion, 11 to 15 percent of everything paid out, of which states had recovered about \$1.2 billion by May 2023 (GAO 2023). The Small Business Administration's inspector general separately estimated that roughly \$200 billion in pandemic loans went to fraudsters (Washington Times 2026). In Minnesota, a nonprofit that received \$3.4 million in 2019 to feed schoolchildren was by 2021 claiming nearly \$200 million a year for 91 million meals that federal prosecutors say largely never existed (Washington Times 2026). What these cases share with the enforcement policies above is not fraud, which is as old as treasuries. It is the absence of the guardian. The verification was switched off, and the officers whose duty was to notice did not. Plato's oligarchs decline to enforce laws whose violation profits them (555c); the modern officer declines to enforce controls whose enforcement is inconvenient, and the effect on the citizen's trust is the same. He concludes, reasonably, that the rules are enforced against him and waived for everyone else.

Correlated failure is the danger, and the polling suggests the correlation is growing. When institutions are trusted only by the party that controls them (Jones 2025), the officeholder's incentive shifts from the powers of the office to the approval of the faction, and Madison's mechanism, which ties the interest of the man to the rights of the place, has nothing to grip. A prosecutor who declines to charge, a regulator who declines to audit, and a legislator who declines to oversee are each rewarded by their own side for the same omission, and punished by no one. The machine can survive a champion. What it cannot survive is a sufficient number of guardians who have privately concluded that the machine is the enemy and that their oath runs to something else.

VIII

The culture that forgot what the machine is for

A structure can only be defended by people who know it exists. The Annenberg Public Policy Center's Constitution Day survey, fielded in August 2026, found that 35 percent of American adults cannot name the three branches of government, and that 18 percent believe a 5–4 Supreme Court decision is sent back to Congress for reconsideration (Annenberg Public Policy Center 2026). These are not marginal errors. A citizen who does not know that a court's ruling is final cannot recognize a check when it operates, and cannot value what he does not recognize.

The second sign is the shape of the appetite for reform. Pew reports that 77 percent of Americans say the political system needs major change or complete reform, and that 63 percent would prefer to elect the president by national popular vote rather than through the Electoral College (DeSilver and Gramlich 2026). The same analysts note, as a problem to be

solved, that the Constitution is among the hardest in the world to amend (Pew Research Center 2026). Some of the reforms Americans favor, term limits for instance, are compatible with the founders' design. What is not compatible is the reasoning that now carries them: a majority wants a change, therefore the structure preventing it is defective. That inference is what *Federalist* No. 10 was written to deny. The reform conversation has adopted the disease as the standard for judging the cure.

The third sign is the most consequential, because it disables the mechanism Madison relied on most. Separation of powers works only if officeholders defend their branch; the interest of the man must be tied to the constitutional rights of the place (Madison 1788c). Gallup's data show the interest of the man now tied to his party instead. Trust in the executive branch stands at 92 percent among Republicans and 4 percent among Democrats, and Gallup's summary is that institutions are trusted only when controlled by one's preferred party (Jones 2025). Congress, the branch the founders expected to dominate, commands the confidence of 9 percent of the public, the lowest of any institution measured (Saad 2026). Ambition can counteract ambition only when a senator's ambition attaches to the Senate. When it attaches to the champion, the check falls silent, and no amount of constitutional text will make it speak.

The fourth sign is the beast. Madison's filter assumed that opinion would be refined as it passed through representatives; the modern information system refines it in the opposite direction. One in five adults, and 38 percent of those under thirty, now get news regularly from social media influencers rather than from news organizations (Pew Research Center 2025), while confidence in television news sits at 14 percent, in newspapers at 17, and in large technology companies at a record low of 20 (Saad 2026). An engagement-ranked feed is a keeper that has learned the beast's appetites with a precision Plato could not have imagined, and it has no more capacity than his keeper to tell good from pleasing. The result is measurable: only 53 percent of Americans now trust the American people themselves to make judgments under the democratic system, the lowest Gallup has recorded (Jones 2025). A public that does not trust itself, and does not trust its institutions, is a public looking for a champion.

The last sign is the deepest, and it is the one Tocqueville predicted. Democratic peoples, he wrote, have a natural taste for freedom, but for equality they have a passion that is "ardent, insatiable, eternal, invincible," and when the two conflict they will surrender the first to keep the second (Tocqueville 1840, vol. 2, pt. 2, ch. 1). Plato said the same thing in reverse: democracy's single good is freedom, and its insatiable pursuit of that good produces the equality of equals and unequals alike that dissolves every distinction the city depends on (562b-c, 558c). The two accounts meet in the present data. In September 2026 Gallup found that 43 percent

of Americans hold a positive view of socialism, the highest in its sixteen years of asking, and that adults under thirty-five view socialism more favorably than capitalism, 57 to 43 percent; positive views of capitalism have fallen to 55 percent and of big business to 35 (Gallup 2026b). Gallup is careful to note that this is not wholesale movement away from markets, since free enterprise remains popular with 77 percent, and the essay accepts the caution. But the direction is not in dispute, and neither is its cause. Asked what they dislike about capitalism, Americans answer greed and corporate power (Gallup 2026a).

That answer closes the circuit with Section V. The critique of concentrated wealth is Marx's, whether or not those who voice it have read him: capital concentrates, the concentration becomes political, and the many who are excluded come to regard the system itself as the enemy (Marx and Engels 1848; Marx 1867, ch. 32). Marx expected that conclusion to be drawn by workers observing the factory. It is now being drawn by citizens observing the campaign finance reports. A political order in which the largest fortunes visibly purchase influence is the most efficient generator of anti-market sentiment that exists, and the super PAC economy has supplied that sentiment with an annual body of evidence. The champion of the left is, in this sense, financed by the donors of the right, and the reverse holds equally. Each grows from the other's excess.

The essay does not claim that a majority of Americans want to abolish markets or the Constitution. It claims something narrower and better supported: that the appetite for equality, which both Plato and Tocqueville identified as the solvent of free institutions, is now being fed from two directions at once, by an economic order that displays its concentration in public and by a political culture that has stopped believing the concentration can be checked. Seventy-seven percent say the system needs major change or complete reform; only 27 percent believe it can happen (DeSilver and Gramlich 2026). A public that believes the machine is both rigged and unfixable has already made the first move Plato describes. It is waiting for someone to make the second.

IX

Conclusion

The United States is not a democracy, and this was never an oversight. Its founders read the argument Plato began, disliked its author, accepted its diagnosis, and built a government whose distinctive features, the filters, divisions, delays, and supermajorities, are each an answer to a specific stage in Book VIII. Against the failure it was built for, the design has held: no faction has rewritten the fundamental law on the strength of an election, the courts still bind the branches, and the states still refuse. Against the failures it was not built for, it has done far worse. A Court redefined

corruption narrowly enough to permit its purchase; national money and national media abolished the fragmentation Madison's cure depended on; officials in several offices at once declined to enforce the laws they held, and called the omission compassion; oversight let hundreds of billions of dollars leave the treasury unnoticed. Those failures are quiet, they belong to no single party, and they are the ones the public names when asked what is wrong.

What the record does not vindicate is the culture. Madison knew the limit of his own machine. In the same paper in which he said an assembly of Socrateses would still be a mob, he added that republican government presupposes certain qualities in human nature to a higher degree than any other form (Madison 1788a). The structure is a hack, in the precise sense: it gets a result out of ordinary people that their virtue alone would not produce. But it presupposes that those people know why the obstacles are there and want them kept. The polling of the past year describes a public that increasingly does not, and that reads every safeguard as an affront to its will. Plato ended the *Republic* by relocating the problem of the city to the soul of the citizen, who must found the just city in himself (592a–b). The founders could not follow him there, and did not try. They built for the citizen he described and hoped the culture would supply the rest. The machine is holding. The question the *Republic* poses to America in 2026 is whether anyone still remembers why it should.



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