

FOUNDATIONAL MODULE

# Climate Justice & Democracy



# What's in this module?

## Description

This module consists of 5 parts that introduce the connection between democracy and climate justice, consider the link between climate justice and voter suppression, explore the effects of the polluter-industrial complex on climate justice, offers solutions, provide additional resources and project options.

## Contents

5 parts  
9 readings  
5 activities  
2 optional projects

## Key Resources

- *Democracy and the Challenge of Climate Change*
- *Why the Climate Crisis Demands Democracy Reform*



Photo by [Harold Mendoza](#) on [Unsplash](#)

# Learning Objectives

01

**Understand** the connection between climate justice and democracy

02

**Consider** the relationship between climate justice and voter suppression

03

**Critique** current election laws based on their inhibition of climate justice

04

**Explore** several solutions to climate injustice in the form of democracy reform

# Introduction

## PART 1



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# Connection Between CJ and Democracy

**“Studies show that democracies tend to generate better climate policy outputs than autocracies, but the empirical evidence that democracy promotes climate policy impact, such as decrease of CO2 emissions, is weak.”** (Lindvall & Karlsson, 2023)

## Democracy can spur climate action

“Democracy also brings critical advantages in formulating effective climate policy, such as representative parliaments which can hold governments to account, widespread civic participation, independent media and a free flow of information, the active engagement by civil society organizations in policymaking and the capacity for institutional learning in the face of complex issues with long-term and global social and political implications.” (Lindvall, 2021)



# Democracy's Drawbacks

## The challenge at a global scale

“Democracy is a system limited by time and space, while the problem of climate change runs across generations and national borders. Moreover, the influence of fossil fuel lobbyism, corruption, policy capture and weak institutional capacity have hampered democracies from acting responsibly.” ([Lindvall, 2021](#))

## Disproportionate effects

- Globally, these challenges disproportionately affect BIPOC, low-income, and coastal communities, and the Global South because they're experiencing the effects of climate change worst and first
- In the U.S., similar communities disproportionately experience environmental and climate injustices, but also have the least power to make change using the tools of democracy



# The Two-Pronged Problem in the U.S.

**There are two key democratic barriers to achieving climate justice**

1. Voter suppression, which disproportionately harms CJ communities
2. Extensive influence from the polluter-industrial complex, which limits CJ legislation

## **Polluter-industrial complex**

The polluter-industrial complex (PIC) refers to the network of Big Business entities such as corporations, industry groups, and think tanks "that stand to profit the most from a weakening of environmental regulations, public health and safety measures, and climate change legislation." ([Faber et al. 2025](#)) The PIC is characterized by its significant political influence, use of propaganda and lobbying, and efforts to undermine environmental regulations and social policies.



# Voter Suppression

PART 2



# Why Voting Rights are Important

## Climate justice from the bottom up

Given the influence of the polluter-industrial complex and the bureaucratic barriers that exist at the national and even state levels of government, it is vital that local governments take action on climate injustice. Of course, this requires that voters are in fact able to vote in their local elections.

## EJ communities = disenfranchised communities

Communities that experience the most environmental and climate injustices are often the same communities that experience the most voter suppression (Chaput, Williams & Figueras, 2021). In order to achieve climate justice, these communities must be able to vote.

For more on CJ from the bottom up see [The GND from Below](#)

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## Examples of Environmental Injustice

- [Flint Water Crisis](#)
- [Flooding in Pajaro, CA](#)
- [Wildfires in Maui](#)
- [Louisiana Cancer Alley](#)

# Voter Suppression

According to the Brennan Center for Justice, more than 19 million people were deprived of their right to vote between 2020 and 2022.

## The tools of voter suppression

- Voter ID
- Voter deception
- Voter intimidation
- Voter purge
- Felon disenfranchisement
- Racial purges

**“Voter suppression of marginalized and low income communities diminishes opposition to anti-environmental and anti-regulatory policies by discouraging or completely preventing groups that tend to vote more progressively from casting ballots in American elections.”** (Chaput, Williams & Figueras, 2021)



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## ACTIVITY #1

# OPEN DISCUSSION OF VOTING RIGHTS AND CJ

## Read

*Voting Rights Are Fundamental to  
Democracy and Climate Justice*

## Guiding questions for discussion

- Do you find the connection between voter suppression and climate justice compelling?
- Have you ever witnessed or experienced voter suppression? What was on the ballot?
- What other issues might be similarly affected by voter suppression?



# The Polluter-Industrial Complex

PART 3



# Overview of the Problem

## Cause

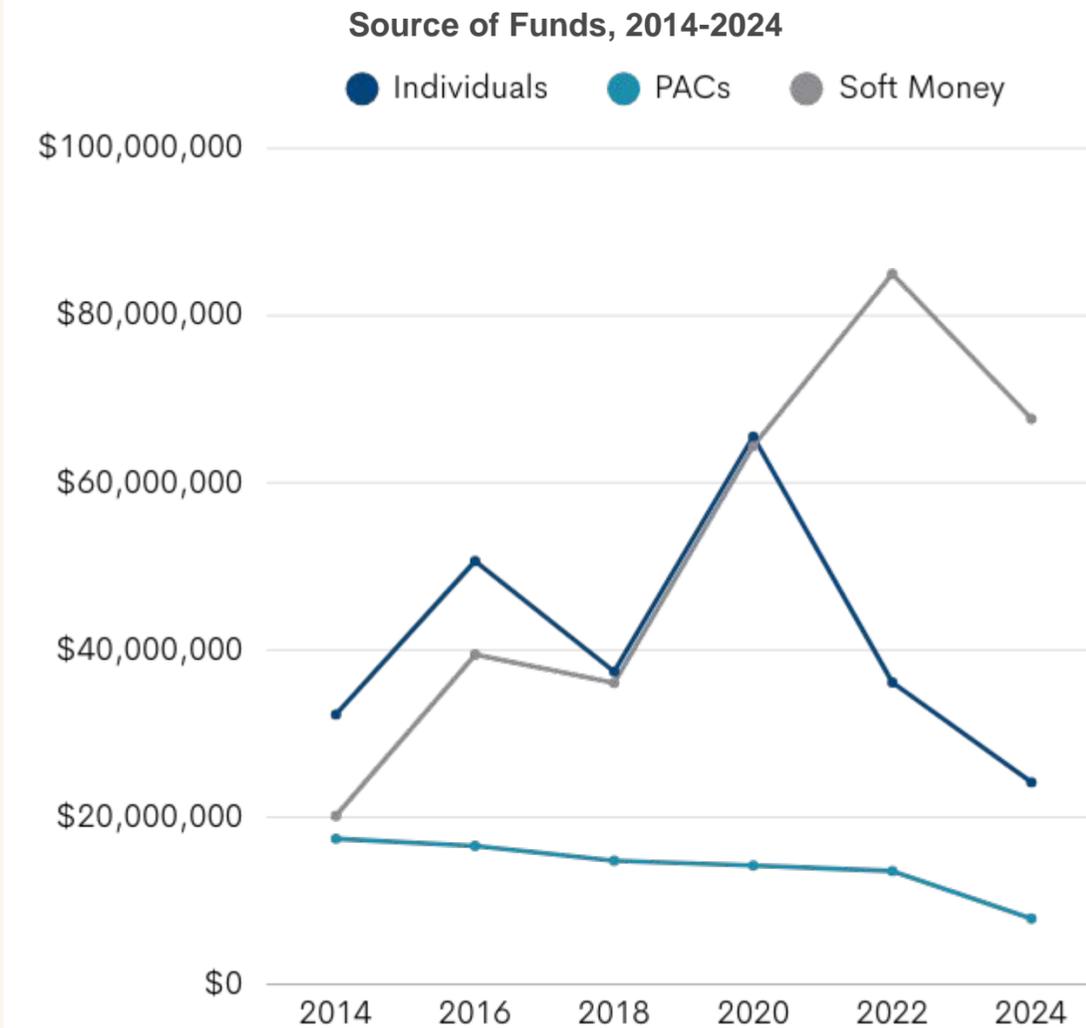
As a result of the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision in 2010, corporations, wealthy individuals, and special interest groups are able to spend an unlimited amount of money on elections and lobbying efforts.

## The polluter-industrial complex (PIC) are big spenders

It is estimated that oil and gas interest groups spend nearly \$1 billion per year lobbying against climate legislation.

## Result

The pervasive influence of the PIC on legislatures at all levels of government has caused an over-reliance on the executive branch to act on climate justice. For example, the Inflation Reduction Act and the Justice40 Initiative are/were both spearheaded by the executive branch.



Source: opensecrets.org

## ACTIVITY #2

# EXPLORING ELECTIONS SPENDING DATA

### Group and explore

In small groups of 3-5 people, spend 5-10 minutes exploring the [Open Secrets Oil & Gas dataset](#). You might compare total spending over time or closely examine the list of contributors, for example.

### Group discussion

Discuss what you explored in your small groups for 5-10 minutes. What did you learn? Did anything surprise you? Did you notice any patterns?

## Oil & Gas Summary

Now showing data for the **2024** election cycle.

### Source of Funds, 1990-2024

\$100M  
\$80M  
\$60M  
\$40M

# What is *Citizens United*?

## Background

*Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, the full title of the case, was brought by conservative nonprofit Citizens United, which sought to lift all restrictions on corporate spending in elections. The Supreme Court ruled that outside groups, including corporations, could spend as much money as they desired on elections on the basis that the First Amendment applied to corporations in addition to individual people.

## The immediate aftermath

The *Citizens United* decision reversed restrictions on election spending that had been in place for over a hundred years and led to the formation of super PACs and political nonprofit groups that consist of many very wealthy and often unnamed donors.



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# *Citizens United* and Climate Justice

## The impact on climate justice

While the PIC has been a far-reaching political influence for many decades, *Citizens United* further increased their electoral power and influence by permitting them to spend an unlimited amount of money to:

1. Support the campaigns of anti-environmentalists and climate-deniers
2. Increase their power over current lawmakers through making large donations
3. Actively lobby against climate justice

In order to achieve climate justice, the influence of the polluter-industrial complex, which was intensified by *Citizens United*, must be addressed.



## ACTIVITY #3

# EXPLORE OPINIONS ON WHAT IS LIMITING CJ POLICY

## Group and assign

Split the class into groups of 3 and assign each person within the group one of the following articles:

1. Climate policy conflict in the U.S. states: a critical review and way forward
2. How Big Money in Politics Blocked U.S. Action on Climate Change
3. How decades of disinformation about fossil fuels halted U.S. climate policy

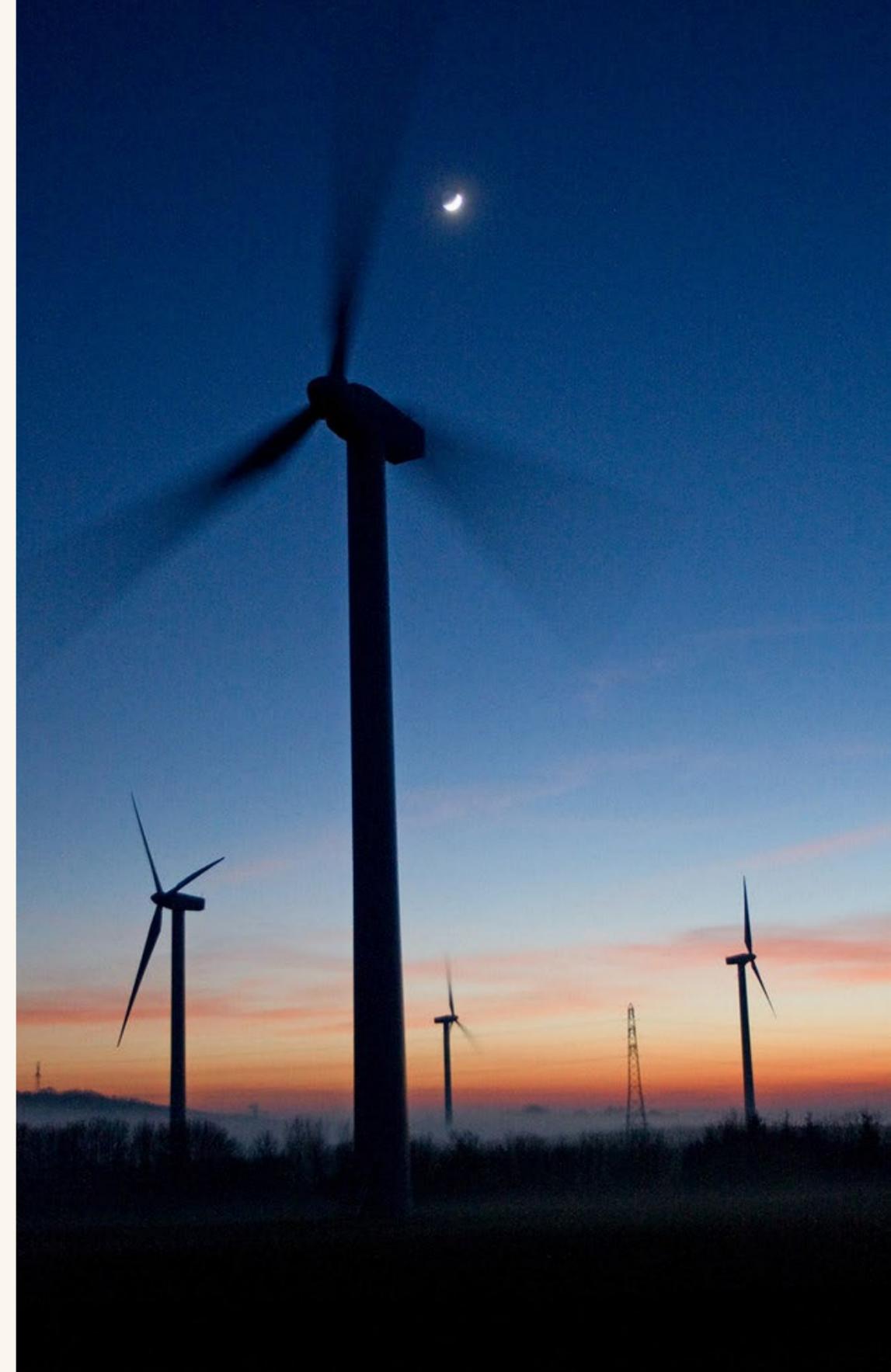
## Read and discuss

In your groups, take 5-10 minutes to read your article and then spend about 10 minutes discussing the articles that you each read. Be sure to provide a brief summary of your article to your group, and feel free to use these questions to guide the rest of your discussion:

- Who is the author of your article? What interests or biases might they have when approaching this subject?
- What or who does the author argue is the main cause of the issue?
- Do you agree with their argument? Why or why not?
- Is there anything missing from their argument? Are there other factors at play that might be preventing CJ policy?
- What solutions are discussed? Do you think they're viable?

# Solutions

## PART 4



# Combat Gerrymandering

## Definition of gerrymandering

“Gerrymandering is when the lines are drawn to manipulate the boundaries to predetermine the outcome of elections, hindering voters from voicing their interests through their votes.” ([ACLU](#))

## Ways to combat gerrymandering

- Reform (i.e. regulations)
- Redesign (i.e. redistricting committees)
- Use web tools to identify gerrymandered maps
- Federal legislation that bans gerrymandering

Republicans won as many as 22 additional House seats due to redistricting in 2016, giving them a 10% margin in seats despite only receiving 1% more of the total votes nationwide. ([Lieb, 2017](#))

## Measuring the effects of gerrymandering

Among the most populated states, which send the majority of members to Congress, nearly three times as many had Republican-tilted congressional districts, according to an Associated Press analysis using a statistical method of calculating partisan advantage known as the “efficiency gap.”

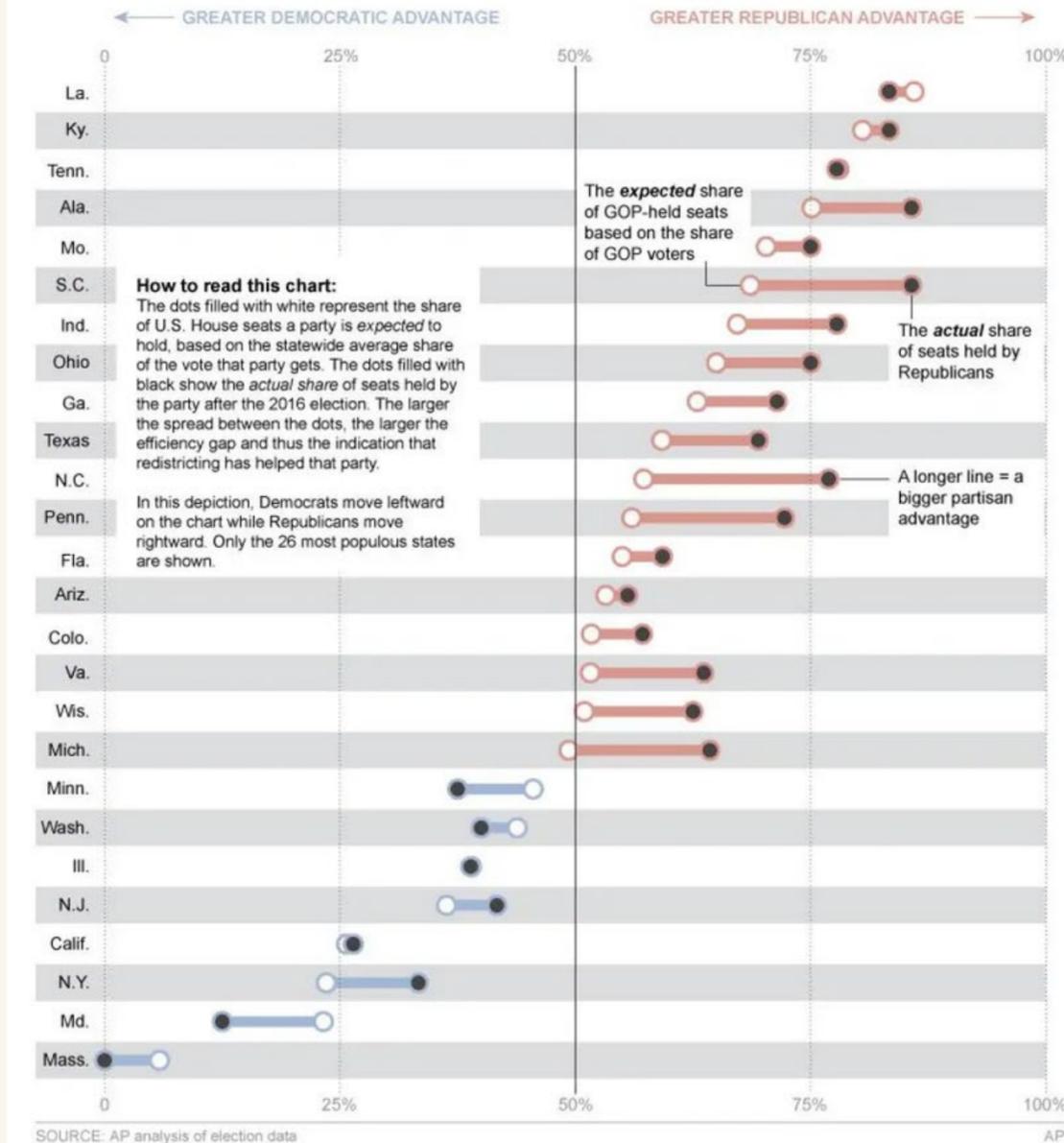


Image retrieved from [AP News](#)

## ACTIVITY #4

# REFORM V. REDESIGN DEBATE

### Group and assign

Split the class into 2 groups and assign each group one of the following articles:

1. *A Partisan Solution to Partisan Gerrymandering: The Define–Combine Procedure* (redesign)
2. *Designing Democracy: A Normative and Empirical Analysis of Redistricting Reform* (reform)

### Debate

Each group will use evidence from their assigned reading to debate this question: Which is a better approach to combat gerrymandering: reform or redesign?

The group that read *A Partisan Solution to Partisan Gerrymandering* will argue that redesign is a better approach, and the group that read *Designing Democracy* will argue that reform is a better approach.

### Debate structure

1. Opening statement (10 min for each group)
2. Group discussion and prepare response (5 min)
3. Response (5 min for each group)

# John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act

The John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act would modernize and revitalize the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

## Key provisions

- Reinstatement of preclearance, which requires jurisdictions with a history of voting discrimination must get approval from the Department of Justice or a federal court before changing their voting laws or practices, including redistricting
- Allow voters to sue to block voting laws and practices that are intentionally discriminatory or will yield discriminatory results
- Allow voters to sue states or localities that implement a voting rule that is more discriminatory than the rule it replaces



# For the People Act

## The For the People Act has two provisions

1. Create a financing system for small donors in federal elections
2. Ensure transparent elections spending by requiring groups that spend a significant amount of money to disclose their donors

## The details of the financing system for small donors

This system would encourage smaller-scale donations by matching every contribution from a small donor with money from public funds, which would be “funded primarily by a surcharge on criminal and civil penalties on corporate defendants and their executive officers.” ([Lau, 2021](#))

## The limits of the For the People Act

Without further insurance or protection, it is possible for the law, even if passed, to be overturned based on court precedent.

# Constitutional Amendment

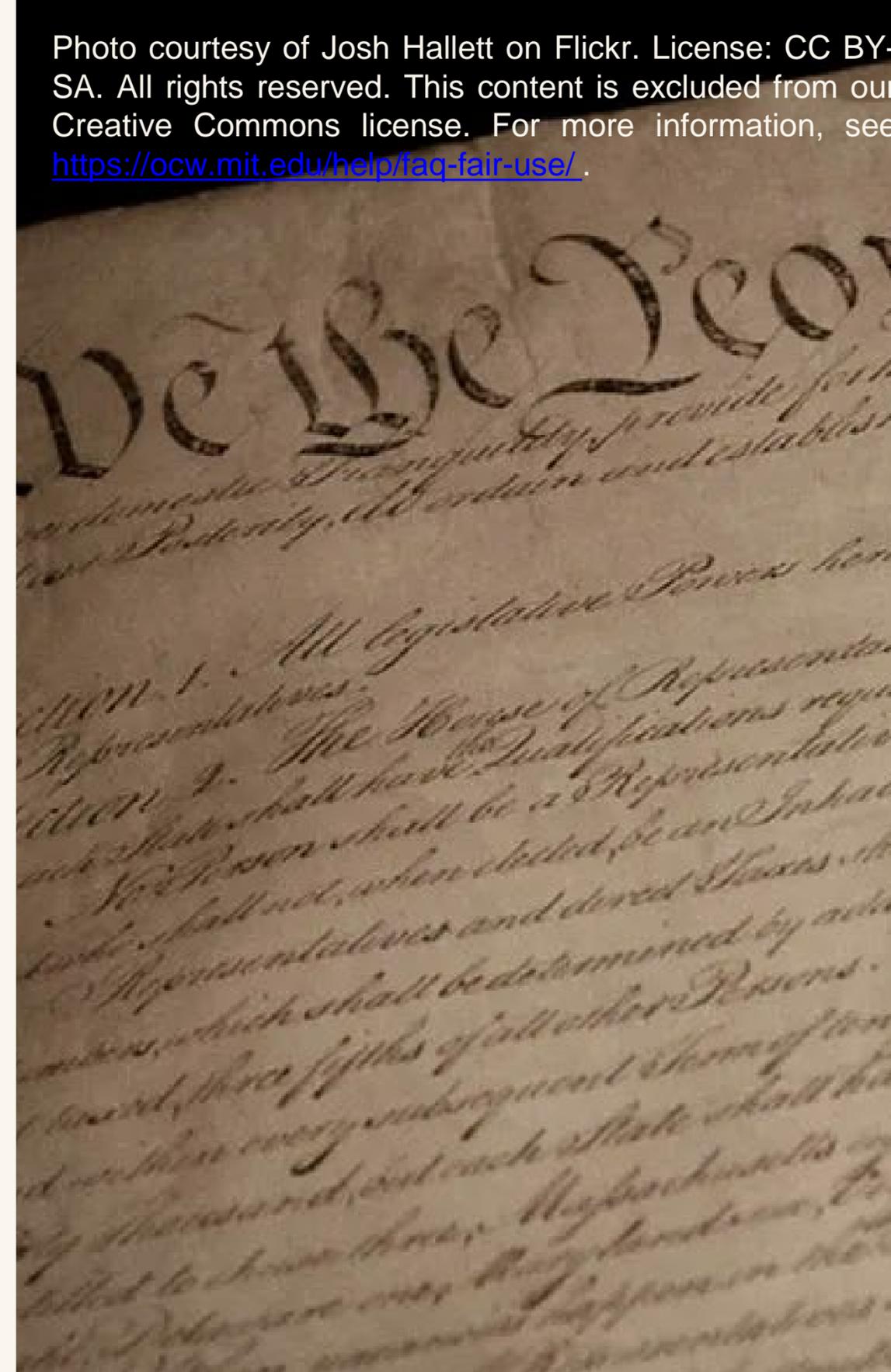
## The content of the amendment

The amendment would “make it clear the Constitution does not restrict the ability of Congress or the states to propose reasonable, content-neutral limitations on private campaign contributions and independent expenditures” and “allow states to enact public campaign financing systems, which can restrict the influence of corporate and private wealth.” ([Schiff Campaign, 2022](#))

## The impact of the amendment

Laws like the For the People Act and legal arguments against extreme corporate spending in politics would be supported by the Constitution, which would outweigh the precedent set by *Citizens United*.

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# Beyond the Module

PART 5

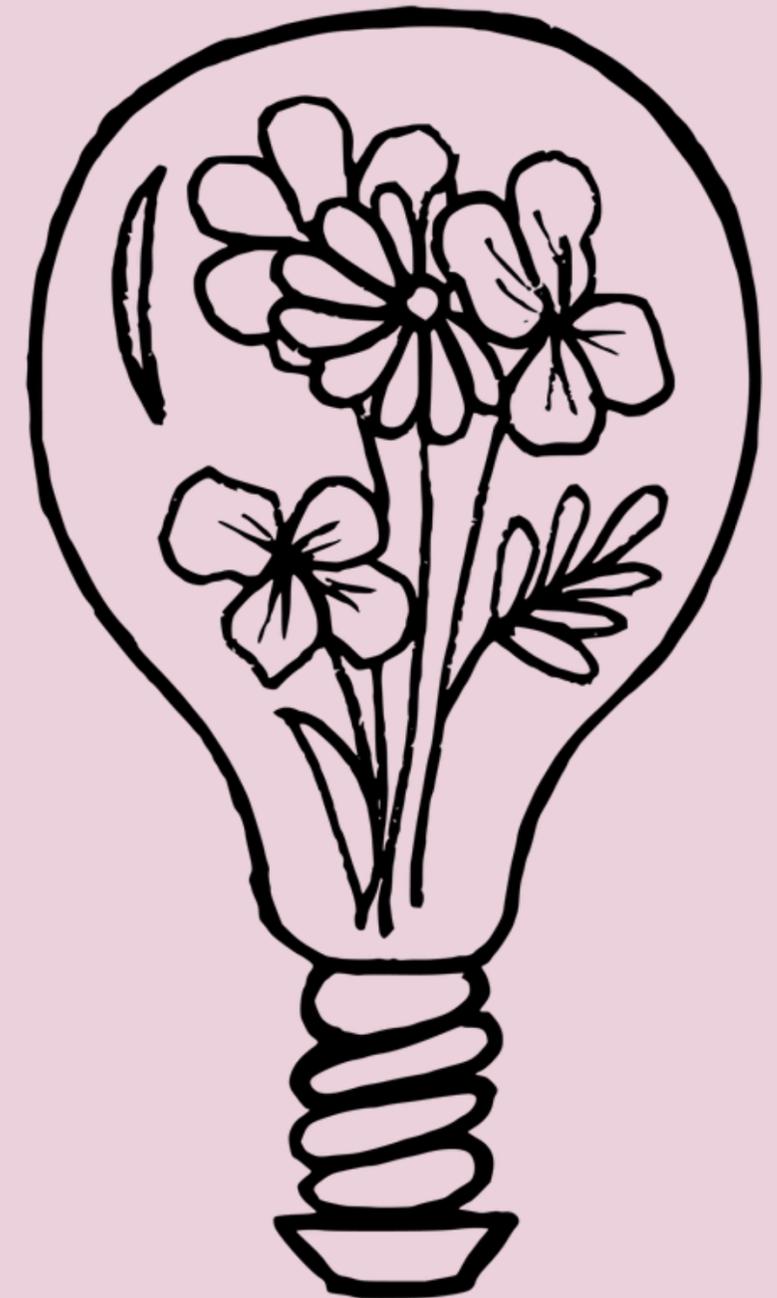


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# Research Project on Solutions

## Prompt suggestion

Pick one or a combination of the solutions to the political barriers to achieving climate justice mentioned in part 4 or any other possible solution(s) and research the viability, effectiveness, and scalability of the solution(s) you selected. This project could take the form of a research paper, presentation, or video.



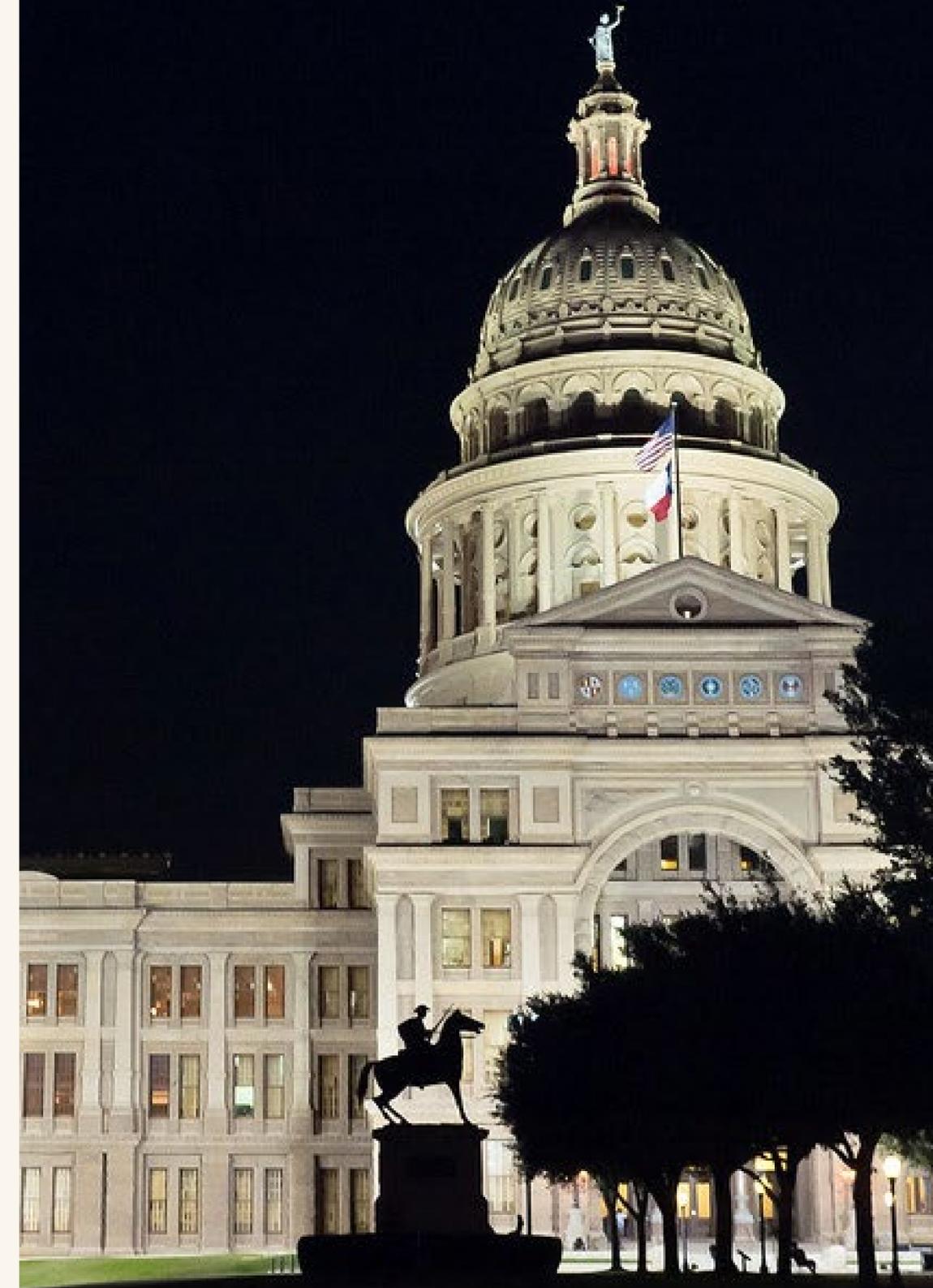
"This image is in the public domain."

PROJECT OPTION #2

# Geographical Analysis of the Relationship Between Democracy & Climate Justice

## Prompt suggestion

Choose a city, county, or region and examine the way that democracy and climate justice interact, intersect, and affect each other in that area in the present and/or past. Have EJ communities experienced voter suppression or have the local politics been influenced by the PIC? How has that affected the area's ability to achieve climate justice? Present your findings to the class.



## PROJECT OPTION #3

# Engage in Your Community

### Prompt suggestion

Do some research on climate justice efforts taking place in your community and find a way to get involved and make your voice heard. If your local government is considering climate justice policy, or policy that might perpetuate climate injustice, you could attend town halls or write letters to your elected officials to voice your support or opposition. If a local civic organization is engaged in a campaign that would further climate justice in your community, volunteer to support their efforts.

The goal of this project is to connect with your community and try to further climate justice using the tools of democracy.



# Additional Resources

- [Brennan Center for Justice](#)
- [Global Center for Climate Justice: Voter Suppression and the Polluter-Industrial Complex](#)
- [The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights](#)
- [American Civil Liberties Union](#)
- [Common Cause](#)
- [Center for Media and Democracy](#)
- [Vote Like a Madre](#)
- [League of Women Voters](#)
- [Earthjustice](#)
- [350.org](#)
- [Natural Resources Defense Council](#)
- [Environmental Law Institute](#)
- [\*Voter Suppression, Climate Justice, and the Polluter-Industrial Complex: How The Corporate Assault On American Democracy And The Climate Are Connected\*](#)

For more resources on climate and environmental justice: **Please explore other modules in the Climate Justice Instructional Toolkit.**



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