

# **Incorruptible:**

Fixing the Crisis in American Democracy

## Intro

November 8th, 2016 was the day we all saw the deep cracks in American democracy.

That evening I was at a victory party for the newly elected mayor of Berkeley, CA. He was the first Latino and the youngest person ever elected as mayor there, and he was deeply progressive. The night was joyous in the way that you only feel from a major victory after months of hard work. I had been one of the leaders of a post-Bernie grassroots group that worked to elect a diverse slate of progressive candidates and also to pass major ballot initiatives in education, infrastructure, voting rights, affordable housing, minimum wage, and public financing of elections. We worked in coalition with other groups and the candidates themselves worked together. I headed up the volunteer canvassing operation for ballot measure X1 (public financing of elections), where we passed a gold-standard, 6-1 financing law, ensuring that one's ability to win a city council seat isn't dependent on having a network of wealthy donors.

We won overwhelmingly. All of our ballot measures passed. The one case where progressive organizations had accidentally endorsed two different progressives for city council worked itself out in Ranked Choice Voting — at first the conservative was ahead, but when all the second choices were counted, a Black woman progressive champion won. We were pumped! We won! And the national election was a shoo-in...or so we thought.

As the night went on, we began to see quiet side conversations, whispers of what was happening nationally, that Clinton had lost one state, then another. Tiny bombs dropped in conversation that would be remembered later, because at the time almost no one there thought it was even possible for Clinton to lose. It took us until well into the night to realize what had happened. Looking back, I think as people realized what was happening nationally they left the event, because the local progressive victory party and the national cataclysm were so jarringly dissonant. That left those of us who remained blissfully ignorant.

Once I got home it was clear what had happened from the look on my husband's face. He was sitting on the couch, our one-year-old asleep next to him (he hadn't even bothered to put him in his crib), with the remote in his hand and a zombie look on his face. He was in shock, because he had believed this was not a possibility.

I was slightly less shocked, but deeply concerned. I had written an [article](#) in the Huffington Post seven months earlier predicting that in a head-to-head between Clinton and Trump, Trump would win, and that our democracy was in danger.

Four years later, we fought hard to ensure that Trump was not re-elected, but our democracy is deeply injured. In a healthy democracy it would not be possible for a sitting president to convince millions that he had won an election that he clearly lost.

This crisis did not start with Trump — he is a symptom of a democracy in decline that has been going on for decades.

As many as [40% of Americans](#) believe that the 2020 election was not legitimate despite no evidence of widespread voter fraud.

Lawmakers in [47 states](#) have introduced legislation making it harder to vote, and in [19 states](#) voter suppression legislation has already been enacted. This is all just in the last 18 months.

Negative partisanship (how much voters from one party [dislike & distrust](#) voters from the other party) is at its highest level [in decades](#). Some cite this as a prelude to [democratic collapse](#). Affiliation as an [independent](#) has risen for forty years, and is now far higher than either party's affiliation.

Depending on which poll you look at, somewhere between [75%](#) and [86%](#) of Americans disapprove of the job Congress is doing.

The Pew Research Center [ranked](#) the U.S. 31st out of 35 countries for voter turnout among the mostly democratic nations that are a part of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

An [NPR/Ipsos poll](#) finds that 64% of Americans believe U.S. democracy is "in crisis and at risk of failing."

Researchers in inequality understand that when inequality gets too high it triggers [political unrest](#). Inequality in America, which before COVID was at its highest point since 1929, has [skyrocketed](#) in the last two years (globally, in 2020 alone [billionaires](#) gained over \$3T while [workers lost](#) over \$3T).

People blame a lot of things for this crisis. Decreasing confidence in institutions, polarization, racism, media conglomeration, labor union weakness, gerrymandering, money in politics, automation, immigration, decline in “civic consciousness,” laziness, Citizens’ United, free trade agreements and the ensuing crumbling of American manufacturing towns, the Republican party, the Democratic party...really the list is quite long.

Having such a long and complicated list paralyzes us. How can we solve so many disparate problems at the same time? We feel scattered and helpless.

But the problem is really not that complex. Why is American democracy in crisis? It’s all a question of power.

**Pro-corporate forces have the power to make the government do what they want; the vast majority of the American people do not.**

That’s the bottom line.

[Researchers at Princeton](#) looked at over 1700 bills that passed through Congress over the course of 20 years to answer one question: whose policies get passed? They found that the top 10% of wage earners had a lot of influence over which bills passed and which bills failed. In fact, every bill that was disliked by the top 10% failed — this group of people had complete veto power over bills in Congress.

But the bottom 90% of wage earners? No influence. Bills with overwhelming support had the same chance of passing as bills that had zero support. In the words of the researchers, “The preferences of the average American appear to have only a miniscule, near zero, statistically non-significant impact on public policy.”

Our crisis in democracy is that we

*“Donald Trump’s supporters view him as a human Molotov cocktail they can throw into a political system that has left them behind.”*

— Michael Moore

don't actually have representation, and people know it. They've stopped believing in the system.

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How do we get out of this mess? We have to flip the balance of power, and do it quick.

The list of fixes seems just as long as the list of problems: build issue movements, hold elected officials accountable, elect more women and people of color, support marginalized communities, get money out of politics, raise awareness, unionize, register people to vote, transform the Democratic party from within, donate to progressive candidates, train people in anti-racism, protest, boycott.... All of these are important. I support all of these efforts. But to me, they seem to be detached from each other and detached from political power.

I'm not here to talk about theory or to propose an idea. Five years ago I heard an incredible David and Goliath story about a small multi-racial group that flipped the power in their city. They did this not once, not twice, but cycle after cycle, despite many millions of dollars of corporate cash spent to defeat them. I tried using the same strategy in Berkeley in 2016 and got a taste of what it was like for progressives to win overwhelmingly. Then I trained people around the country in this strategy and saw how powerful it is on the ground. In real life.

I am like a dog with a bone — I have been offered many jobs that pay more, but I simply can't work on anything else, because I know from experience that this strategy *works*. Having worked directly with the group that did it first and having trained a lot of people, I've seen both success and failure (failure when we leave out parts of the strategy). I'll present quite a few theories in this book about *why* the strategy is so successful. But I don't continue this work because of theory; I continue because this strategy succeeds.

The beauty of this strategy is that while it builds issue movements, while it engages the most vulnerable in the political process, while it elects more progressives more quickly, the real change is in the balance of power. Using this strategy, power shifts from the old establishment, funded by corporate dollars, to

a new establishment: a coalition of BIPOC and progressive constituencies whose demands reflect those of the vast majority of the American people.

Imagine if our elected officials were leaders in our movements for change. Imagine if, instead of us spending our free time trying to convince them to simply vote for the policies we need, they spent their time bringing voters on board for those same policies. Faster climate action, background checks on gun purchases, Medicare for All, and free public college, which all have majority support, would already be the law of the land. And our elected officials would go from community to community, bringing marginalized voices into the political process, helping to build issue movements, and passing policies that working families need.

Does this seem like an impossible dream? It's not. There is a strategy we could adopt that would create this world. We just have to choose it.

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In 2003 people in a small city a stone's throw from San Francisco began wresting control of their city from Big Oil.

For a hundred years the city of Richmond, CA had been under the control of Chevron. Home to the second largest oil refinery in the country, Richmond was dominated by the needs of this multi-billion dollar international fossil fuel corporation. Chevron poured so much money into the city elections that it had a desk inside City Hall. Every five years or so there would be a spill or an explosion, sending hundreds of people to the hospital and doing long-term damage to the environment. And, like other corrupt cities, Richmond had a host of other problems: low wages compared to surrounding cities, the second highest homicide rate in the country, and terrible police brutality problems in a predominantly Black and Latino population, among others.

By 2003, residents had had enough. They formed a coalition of BIPOC and progressive groups called the Richmond Progressive Alliance (RPA) and began using a very different strategy to elect true representatives of the people to the city council. They ran diverse slates of candidates for city council and mayor, electing one of their founders to the city council in the fall of 2004. That woman

soon became the mayor, and shortly after that the RPA gained a majority on the city council. By a decade later, the RPA had become THE dominant force in city politics, maintaining a majority or super majority on the city council for many years to come.

This all happened despite fierce opposition: in 2014 alone, Chevron spent over three million dollars to defeat the RPA, yet all three RPA candidates won that year and all the Chevron-backed candidates lost. In a city of 110,000 people, you can imagine what \$3M can do. And Chevron is not the only player to have spent millions trying desperately to stop this people-powered movement. For having the audacity to push for things like rent control, higher wages, relief for underwater mortgage holders, and other popular policies, Wall St, Big Soda, and other industries have all taken a swing at pouring millions into Richmond city council races. But the RPA successfully maintained its ability to win a majority.

The RPA's electoral prowess is undeniable. But to me, this is only half of the battle, only half of the genius of an effective progressive strategy. The other half is how much the RPA elected officials stayed true to the original policy platform and built a movement for change. Under the RPA, Richmond reduced its homicide rate by 75%; got Chevron to pay over a hundred million dollars in new taxes; passed the first rent-control law in the state of California in 30 years; and now has one of the best community policing forces in the country (and is one of the few cities post-George Floyd that is reducing its police budget and moving 911 services to unarmed responders).

Most stunning was their decision in 2008 to protect homeowners during the foreclosure crisis. They passed a law that allowed the city of Richmond to use the power of eminent domain to force Wall St banks to sell underwater mortgages to the city for current market value; the city would then renegotiate a fair mortgage with the resident.<sup>1</sup>

So what happened that allowed this change in Richmond? Did they get lucky? For many electoral cycles in a row? Did they just happen to choose good

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<sup>1</sup> While the city council did pass this policy, unfortunately it could not be implemented by the bank, which required two other cities in the region to commit before it would move forward. Neighboring cities did not have enough bold, uncorrupted city councillors who were willing to fight for their residents against the power of Wall St.

candidates, who happened to stay true to the policy platform? Are the people of Richmond just more progressive, more radical, or better organizers? And did they suddenly become that way starting in 2003?

Fortunately, there is one simple answer:

*The RPA had a fantastic strategy.*

A good strategy can be the difference between winning and losing. A great strategy can mean that we can win against incredible odds, that we can win the unwinnable fight. Like David vs Goliath, a battle that seems impossible turns into a crazy fluke of a win; but then it's followed by another crazy fluke and another, until it becomes clear that it's not a fluke at all, but a winning strategy we can replicate. A strategy we can pull out when the odds seem wildly bent against us, and the stakes are incredibly high. And that is where we are right now; with climate change bearing down on us and inequality higher than it's ever been, we need a string of crazy fluke wins like never before.

What makes a great strategy so powerful? It's all in an insight....

Most progressive political organizations follow a standard playbook. We all recognize there's a problem, and we all try to fix it in the same way, with the same set of things to do (tactics). For example, we progressives see our elected officials not representing what the vast majority of Americans want, need, and deserve, and we want to fix it. We all have a common playbook on how to fix it, with the goal of electing more progressives, more women, and more people of color. We look at who is running for office, we try to determine which of them is the best, we endorse them, and then we try to help them win their elections. That is the standard playbook. And this playbook does do some good; we can point to many wins. But we can also point to many losses.

Great strategies come from people who have been in the trenches for a while, going through the standard playbook over and over, seeing it both succeed and fail. At the heart of a great strategy is an insight into a core weakness of the



standard playbook. This insight recognizes a truism about the end result of following the playbook, a consistent weakness that leads to lack of success.

Fundamental to a great strategy is a *guiding principle* that solves this inherent weakness. Knowing from deep experience the primary reason why the standard playbook often fails to deliver, the guiding principle affects everything we do to get from point A to point B.

The easiest way to tell a great strategy from the standard playbook is just by seeing it win. A great strategy can win against all odds over and over when other people in the same situation lose. Something is clearly different. But many people see a winning strategy and only see a few tactical differences between it and the standard playbook. If you don't look at how the *strategy* is different, picking up a few tactics will not get the wins that you get from the strategy.

If you don't have a deep understanding of — and a commitment to — the guiding principle, you are bound to fall back into old habits, into tactics from the standard playbook. These standard playbook tactics don't just move us forward less quickly — they can undermine the winning strategy. By using tactics that are not coherent with the guiding principle, we can undo the benefits we get from the few tactics we have noticed and changed. Every tactic in a great strategy upholds the guiding principle; this is why it's so important that we understand the full strategy and don't just focus on tactics.

In 2017 I began training people across the country in the winning strategy used by the RPA through a small non-profit called The Incorruptibles. I've personally trained people in over 25 different cities in red, blue, and purple states from California to Oklahoma to Pennsylvania and others. Our online training has reached many more cities from more than 18 other states. I've had the opportunity to discuss this model with progressive city councillors and mayors who have attended the workshops. You'll see a few quotes from attendees of our workshops in the margins of this chapter. And in my home city in

**“The training The Incorruptibles provides is invaluable.** As a sitting progressive mayor, I believe The Incorruptibles' training will change the nature of politics in my city for the better. I encourage every progressive elected official to learn this effective new model.”  
— Heidi Harmon, mayor of San Luis Obispo

Massachusetts, we are following the strategy to elect and support our city councillors and school committee members (after only two election cycles of following the strategy, we now have a majority on both electoral bodies).

## The Incorruptible strategy

The insight about why our standard playbook fails: *Sinema Syndrome*.

There is a huge, unspoken problem in politics that most electoral organizations not only don't know how to deal with, but generally refuse to mention or recognize as a problem. I'll call it "Sinema Syndrome." It is the reality that our political system is a horrible, poisonous swamp that can convert well-intentioned people into politicians who do the bidding of the 1%.<sup>2</sup>

I have seen many progressive organizations tout their successes by talking about how many dollars have been donated to progressive candidates, how many calls have been made for progressive candidates, how many doors knocked, and finally how many of their endorsed candidates have won elections. But they never go back through the list of previously endorsed candidates and rate them as to whether or not they are fighting for progressive policy as hard as we want them to, or whether they would even gain their endorsement today.

If we succeed in electing people who in year one are fantastic but by year ten do nothing but the bidding of their corporate donors, killing all hope of a Green New Deal, Medicare expansion, free public college, \$15 minimum wage, and any of the other policies they originally campaigned on, *are we winning?*

We're trying to fill a bucket that has a huge hole in it, and all anyone is talking about is where to get more water. **We have to talk about how to plug the hole.**

<sup>2</sup> If you're unfamiliar with Senator Kyrsten Sinema, she is a former social worker who is now a Senator for Arizona. She started out as a Green Party candidate who spoke out against capitalism, organized anti-war rallies, opposed NAFTA and the death penalty, and worked for LGBTQ+ rights and the DREAM Act. She is now considered one of the most conservative Democrats in the Senate (ranking 47<sup>th</sup> out of 50) and is one of the two Democratic Senators who prevented the Build Back Better reconciliation bill from passing; this bill includes universal preschool, paid family leave, reducing prescription drug costs, and certain green energy tax credits, among other things. All of these provisions are ones she once claimed to be in favor of, and there is not a single one of them that she is now willing to vote for.

We have to recognize a fundamental truth about our current political system, one that is probably true for any representative democracy. It should come as no surprise because it is an old adage: power corrupts.

**Cardinal Rule of politics:**

**Every elected official moves only in one direction:  
away from policies that benefit the vast majority of Americans,  
and toward the demands of the powerful few.**

Politicians might move slowly or quickly, they might move only a short way down that road, but elected officials immersed in our political system don't come back to us. It is a one-way street.

This is our insight into the weakness of the standard playbook. The standard playbook might succeed in electing some progressives, but those people then become less and less progressive.

You may belong to an organization that does more than the standard playbook, but I want to lay this out as the basic, "level one" playbook that small grassroots volunteer organizations often use.

"The novel approach *The Incorruptibles* takes to achieving lasting progressive change at a local level is like nothing I've seen before in two decades of activism."  
— *Organizer, Waltham, MA*

**Standard playbook for electing progressives:**

**Goal:** Elect more progressives.

**Tactics:** Get progressives together, wait for candidates to declare they are running, endorse the most progressive and diverse ones, then funnel donations and volunteers to their campaigns so they have a better chance of winning.

At *The Incorruptibles*, we believe that being "incorruptible" is not something you're born with — it's more like being in shape. You stay in shape by making exercise a regular habit. You remain incorruptible as long as you keep doing the regular habits that keep you that way.

The Incorruptible strategy is based on the RPA model with additions from union organizer Jane McAlevey, Bernie Sanders, and things I learned as I trained people across the country. This strategy elects more progressives than the standard playbook and, not only does it keep them from moving away from us on policy, it helps them become leaders in our movements for change.

**The Incorruptible strategy:**

**Weakness in the standard playbook:** Sinema syndrome. We must overcome the Cardinal Rule of our political system so that our elected officials remain at the forefront of our movements for change.

**Guiding policy:** Elected officials, like all human beings, take on the culture of the people they see as their peer group or team, the people they spend the most time with or hear from the most. Everything in our electoral process, before, during, and after the election, must provide candidates and elected officials with a trusted team that materially helps them and with many opportunities to hear the voices of those most in need (those least in power). Our elected officials are trained to seek out marginalized communities where they are and engage them in the political process in a style of “co-governance.”

“I think the model that The Incorruptibles puts forth is something that all activist organizations need to learn, especially in the current era. I’ve told everyone I know that they need to bring this workshop to their group.”  
— Rachel Distler, Our Revolution Somerville

**Coherent tactics:** I will discuss the details of these tactics at length later in the book. For now, it’s easier to look at the differences between the standard playbook tactics and the Incorruptible strategy tactics.

<b>Standard playbook</b>	<b>The Incorruptible strategy</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Progressive orgs are siloed</li> <li>2. Endorse in many disconnected races</li> <li>3. Wait for candidates to self-select</li> <li>4. Candidates are siloed</li> <li>5. Walk away after the election</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Form a BIPOC &amp; progressive coalition</li> <li>2. Focus on a single electoral body</li> <li>3. Cultivate candidates from the coalition</li> <li>4. Candidates run together on a platform</li> <li>5. Provide support after the election</li> <li>6. Elected officials engage marginalized voices directly in democracy</li> </ol>

**1. Coalition.** In the standard playbook, each organization prioritizes issues and endorses candidates separately. In the Incorruptible strategy, progressive and BIPOC organizations form a coalition to work together on electoral politics. (This does not mean that each organization cannot continue to create their own list of endorsed candidates, but that the coalition understands the strategy and coordinates many of their actions to become coherent with the broader goals of the group.)

**2. Single electoral body.** In the standard playbook, each organization endorses in many disconnected races. One organization may endorse a couple of people for city council, one for mayor, one or two for state house, one for state assembly, one for the House and one for the Senate. And let's say this group works like crazy and succeeds in electing all of these people. AND let's also imagine that, miracle of miracles, every one of those elected officials stays true to their values and campaign promises. We've won, right?

Not necessarily. Each one of those elected officials will probably be outnumbered by conservative, pro-corporate forces in each electoral body, and rendered incapable of passing any of the policies we want.

The Incorruptible strategy focuses on only one political body. By focusing on a small body like a city council, you can quickly gain a majority — which means you can *just pass policy* — the best way to regain trust from the electorate. You'll see later in the book how this strategy can quickly break a stranglehold on power in large political bodies like the Massachusetts State House, passing progressive policy long before we elect a majority.

**3. Cultivate candidates.** In the standard playbook, progressive organizations wait for candidates to self-select. This results in candidates being mostly male, mostly white, and mostly wealthy; in other words, the people least likely to have the lived experience necessary to understand the needs of the vast majority of Americans, let alone the most vulnerable. They are also unlikely to have the community connections we need to engage marginalized voices in the political process. In the Incorruptible strategy, we cultivate diverse candidates from within our set of coalition partners. Because there is so much opportunity to

work with both electeds and non-electeds on strategy, legislation, and all other aspects of governance (discussed below), over time we provide years of cultivation and training for under-served people to see elected office as not only a possible career they feel prepared for but as a calling.

**4. Slate.** In the standard playbook, candidates are siloed. It is “every man for himself,” as they say. Candidates do not endorse each other, talk about how their campaigns are going, or make any attempt to coalesce on policy. In the Incorruptible strategy, candidates run together on a slate that endorses a single policy platform. This is very powerful for voters. When I was running for office, I would often convince a voter that I was the better candidate, but then they would ask, “but can you really affect change as just one person?” Having a slate of candidates that are all committed to the same policies is very powerful in convincing voters they will get real change, not just unfulfilled promises.

More importantly, this allows the candidates to see each other as teammates, and to learn to work together before they enter office. It’s the guiding principle in action; we need our elected officials to feel they have a team, and for that team to include other people who are committed to the platform.

**5. Provide support.** In the standard playbook, progressive organizations and volunteers walk away after the election is over. In the Incorruptible strategy, we provide deep support to every elected official.

This is one of the least well understood aspects of the strategy. When I say we will support elected officials, people immediately think about supporting them in their next election. And that’s because it fits into the standard playbook. It’s hard for people to even imagine a different way of interacting with our elected officials than what we do today. What I am talking about is *co-governance*. More on this in a minute.

**6. Electeds engage the community.** The most important part of the strategy in terms of re-invigorating our democracy is something that elected officials must do. It is the actual mechanism by which we re-engage people in democracy.

The best elected officials I’ve met facilitate group discussions that are in some ways like “reverse town halls.” In a standard town hall, the elected official

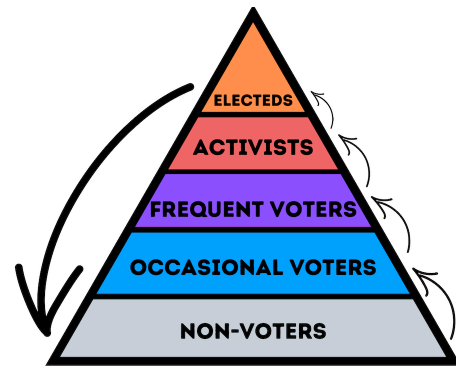
chooses a location that is comfortable for them and at the event is considered the expert. Attendees ask them questions and they answer.

A “reverse town hall” is held at a location that is comfortable for a specific group of people — their church, college, kids’ school, union hall, neighbor’s house, etc. And the elected is there to ask questions and listen. What are your lives like? What are your concerns? What solutions do you want?

Often when a community has a concern, they’ve already come up with solutions, and sometimes they’ve gone through the process of discussing and debating different solutions to finalize something that works for them all. Great elected officials help connect people with others who have similar concerns and with the resources they need to be part of making their chosen solution happen.

When electeds meet regularly with residents to facilitate these conversations, it moves everyone up the ladder of democracy.

People begin to get engaged in their own or their neighbor’s ideas. They see their elected official as someone who listens to them and helps them reach their goals. Non-voters begin voting, occasional voters vote more frequently, more people become regularly engaged in community groups as activists.



### **The Importance of Co-Governance**

As I have traveled around the country giving workshops, it’s not uncommon for a sitting progressive mayor or city councillor to attend the workshops. And when I go over this aspect of the strategy, I usually get very strong reactions from them, like, “Oh my gosh! I need this!!” They are desperate for this kind of support and immediately understand its importance.

Let me walk you through what happens to most progressive elected officials. During their campaign, they gain volunteers. They continue to gain support for months, with more and more people helping them. Then the election happens, and there is an election night party. Everyone is there, everyone is happy, and at the end of the night all the volunteers go home. And they never come back. And

that is the high point for the elected official; that is the moment that everything starts to go downhill.

These elected officials enter office only to realize what the RPA knows: no one person could ever do all the work necessary to govern. No one.

Even at the city council level, which is supposedly the “easiest,” (and where elected officials often have neither staff nor a full salary), city councillors have to understand every policy area as well as many aspects of law including laws that limit what cities can do. They have to read hundreds of pages of legalese, appended reports and documents in preparation for each meeting. In addition, they have what is called “constituent services,” which means attending to the specific, individual needs of any of their constituents that contact them. This can include helping people wade through government bureaucracy, responding to correspondence about potholes, rats, vandalism, trees, pending legislation, or anything else people reach out to them about. It could be two people in a week, or it could be a hundred.

Meanwhile, lobbyists from special interests take the time to write up glossy reports with beautiful graphs showing how this new development or that corporate tax break will be good for the city or the district or the state. Our elected officials are bombarded with information from the other side, and very little from us.

Our progressive elected officials are wildly overworked. Denise Provost, former Massachusetts state rep, compared the State House to a university because every day you have to become an expert on something new, and the test (the vote) is just hours away. Imagine that every week you are handed hundreds or thousands of pages on topics on which you are not an expert (because no one can be an expert on every policy). You have three days, or sometimes three hours to read it all, find out how your constituents and allies feel about it, write

“The workshops in Oklahoma were fabulous! Thanks so much for giving us a template, we were just talking tonight, and a board member said that The Incorruptibles’ workshops were the most significant thing we’ve done yet as an Our Revolution group.”

— *Melody Ball, Our Revolution*



amendments to improve it, and organize constituents to raise awareness or to pressure the other elected officials to support or oppose it.

It is literally impossible.

No one can do this by themselves. It is not uncommon for progressive electeds to step down after only a few years, because the amount of work and stress is overwhelming. And, of course, the standard playbook includes a final step that we usually don't attach to our electoral strategy: when the elected official does something you don't like, which eventually they all do, your job is to *get angry*.

Progressives do not hesitate to publicly protest against politicians they once endorsed. It is so much a part of our standard playbook that we don't question it. It is what the phrase, "hold your representative accountable" means: we beg and plead, and then we get mad. It assumes that we as constituents have certain roles at certain times: during election season it is to endorse and knock doors for the people we hope will be good; to provide them as much support as we possibly can. And after someone is elected our only relationship with them is antagonistic. Either we are "holding them accountable" or we are doing nothing.

When we look at candidates who are in bed with special interests, we understand why they stay in power for decades. They also have a team helping them get elected. In addition to volunteers, they have donors with lobbyists and think tanks. And after their election night party, their volunteers also go home, but the donors and lobbyists and think tanks don't.

This support network works diligently to understand every policy that might affect them, to read all the legislation that is coming down the pipe — often this legislation is not only read by lobbyists and think tanks, it is written by them. They are often the first people to see legislation, before even the majority of legislators, because even if they didn't write it themselves, they may have access to party leadership which allows them to see legislation first. They weigh in on legislation before it comes to a vote, telling their elected officials how to vote so they don't need to read the legislation in full.

Even at the city level, this concept holds true. Real estate developers, national chain stores, and others who have the resources write up reports with beautiful

graphs and photos arguing for their projects to go through. Plenty of studies have shown that the people who self-select to reach out to their city councilor or mayor are much wealthier, whiter, and more likely to be homeowners than the average constituent. Because of these factors, elected officials get a very skewed viewpoint of what their constituents want, and often neglect policies needed by the majority of residents.

The RPA takes this as a given: with the amount of pressure elected officials are under, if we don't support them *we have to expect them to move to the other side*. It is simply the way the system works.

So when I say the Incorruptible strategy supports elected officials, I am talking about *co-governance*. Each elected official forms a “packet committee” of interested residents who help them read through the city council packet before each city council meeting. This team should have connections to coalition members so that they can provide guidance. Because the coalition is a combination of BIPOC and progressive organizations, the packet committee can provide both lived experience and policy expertise. Committee members engage coalition organizations to get help with research, advice, and policy writing. And let's not forget that we often need the community to get involved to get policies passed — having a committee strategizing directly with the elected officials lets coalition organizations engage their members in actions designed to get policies passed, like letter writing or public protests.

By having a packet committee, elected officials are creating a new level of engagement in democracy. This group is in fact deeply involved in legislating. It is a great role for anyone who might want to run for office in the future. Any elected official, even from a marginalized group, will need to learn from the lived experience of other groups in the community. Including these voices is both necessary for the elected official and a great way to bring marginalized communities up the ladder of democracy, getting their chosen policy solutions on the table and engaging them in helping to get those policies passed.

“Every local resistance group needs this workshop! This is a great framework to flip the power in your own local community and build leadership for higher offices!”  
— *Karen May, ActLocal*

## **The rest of this book**

As you can imagine, the strategy I've been describing has very specific ways of implementing the tactics we use. We may do some of the tactics you are familiar with in a different way, and we include many tactics you may not be familiar with. A large portion of this book is dedicated to this suite of tactics and how best to ensure that we are doing each tactic in a way that follows the guiding principle.

In addition to the details of our full suite of tactics, the rest of the book discusses:

- **The Hard Parts:** parts of the strategy that groups I've trained seem to have the most difficulty with, why these elements are important, why people have difficulty, and how to do these as best we can.
- **How we could modify the strategy to have the most impact at the state level in Massachusetts.**
- **Corruption:** what it is and what it isn't, who it affects, how it happens, and how we can slow its course.
- **Focus:** A variety of standard playbooks that we should spend less time doing, and why.

Imagine our elected officials being leaders in our movements for change, not only voting for our progressive policies but using their position to create the mass movements we need to pass policies that truly meet the needs of the vast majority of Americans.

Does this seem like an impossible dream?

**It's not. There is a strategy we could adopt that would create this world.**

**We just have to choose it.**

*You can sign up for your Incorruptible Mass street team or volunteer on the Incorruptible Mass state team at <https://www.incorruptiblemass.org/>.*