The United States is walking on a razor’s edge in the 2020s. The country could become more democratic and inclusionary if the Democratic Party can continue to benefit from higher turnout within communities of color and from younger voters, increase its rising support from women voters, and hold on to the 42–44% of the white vote it needs to succeed. In addition, a wide range of egalitarian and inclusionary activist groups can benefit the Democrats if they can continue to organize sustained political challenges to the many conservative legislative initiatives they oppose.

On the other hand, ultraconservative white nationalist dominance could continue. The Republican Party has strongholds in 14 of the 17 former slave states, most of which are in the South: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma (a slave territory when the Civil War broke out), South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and West Virginia (which was part of Virginia until 1863). All of these states had laws requiring school segregation until the Brown vs. Board of Education decision by the Supreme Court in 1954, and they also had laws against marriage between whites and African Americans until 1967.

Those 14 Southern states are joined by nine white nationalist-leaning states in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains: Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming. All but two of these states banned interracial marriage until at least the mid-1950s; they also had exclusionary laws directed toward Native Americans, who were forced to live on reservations, and toward Chinese immigrants and Mexican-Americans. In other states, the Republican Party has the ability to win over many white voters by focusing on contentious social issues related to abortion, immigration, sexuality, race, and ethnicity.

Whichever way the country turns in terms of inclusion and exclusion, it is very likely that the wealthiest Americans, who make up 0.5% of the population at most, will continue to be the most powerful group in the country. The direction taken by a majority of these few exceptionally wealthy people may play a part in shaping the outcome of the conflict between conservative
white dominance and a more inclusionary democracy. But it is beyond their power to determine the final results; the other 99.5% of Americans will decide the direction the country takes in the 2020s.

### Who Are the Top 0.5%?

The wealthiest Americans are primarily the owners and managers of a few thousand large banks, corporations, real estate companies, and agribusinesses. They have dominated the United States on major policy issues for the past 130–40 years through a complex, but completely visible network of for-profit and nonprofit organizations that is easier to study than many people may realize. The wealthy few have been successful in their efforts to win and retain power because the rights and privileges of ownership, along with their capacity to create policy-planning and opinion-shaping organizations, make it possible for them to shape government policy.

The corporate owners and managers, for all their differences of opinion and competition among their corporations, share five overriding common goals, which help to keep them united.

First and foremost, they want to eliminate as many labor unions as they possibly can. Wealthy business owners always have viewed unions as one of their greatest potential threats. Government support for the right of workers to organize unions was forced upon them in the midst of the upheaval generated by the Great Depression of the 1930s and the preparation for World War II (1939–1945), which the United States entered in 1941. Since then, they have largely succeeded in eliminating unions from their companies, using a wide variety of methods.

On this issue, the top owners and high-level managers have been well served by many of the same former slave states and states in the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains that are the core of the white nationalist Republican coalition. Building on what are called right-to-work laws, these states make it extremely difficult to organize unions. Their state laws build on the claim that they have to protect individual rights by allowing workers to refuse to pay union dues, even though they are receiving the benefits the unions provide them, such as higher wages and safer working conditions (Dempsey 1961, pp. 25–27). There were 19 right-to-work states in 1965, with a majority in the South and Southwest. By the end of 2000, there were 21 right-to-work states, and the number had grown to 26 by 2021. In addition to 21 of the 23 white nationalist states, they include Arizona, Indiana, Michigan, Nevada, and Wisconsin.

Second, the corporate owners and managers have sought to expand international trade and investment since the 1940s—a goal they finally reached in 2000, due to landmark legislative victories in the 1990s.

Third, they are united by their common desire to reduce taxes on high-income individuals and corporations. Higher taxes were first legislated
by the Democratic Party during the Great Depression and then were raised to help finance World War II. Since that time, the corporate owners and managers have worked together to greatly reduce these taxes, and they were very successful in these efforts during the Reagan, George W. Bush, and Trump administrations.

Fourth, they work together to limit government regulation of business. Fifth, they join together to restrain the growth of several forms of government social insurance, including Social Security payments, health care, and disability benefits. Within the context of these five shared goals, the several issues that have divided them into moderate conservatives and ultraconservatives for well over 100 years are relatively minor.

The corporate owners and managers also remain united in order to counter the constant challenges they all receive from communities of color, feminists, environmentalists, climate activists, inclusionary white liberals, and the leaders of some unions. These activist groups sometimes work together as an inclusionary alliance in order to organize sustained challenges on a wide range of issues. On many issues, the inclusionary alliance works within the Democratic Party as well. In the face of these challenges, the wealthy corporate owners and managers cannot take any solace from the fact they often defeated their opponents in the past; they are always concerned with what could happen in the future.

Some of these activist groups are social movements, which are different from lobbying groups and political campaigns. Social movements are organized efforts to change established rules and customs by means of actions that are atypical, sometimes unruly, and often considered illegal. Members of social movements are often rule-breakers, although the laws and customs they seek to change—such as the many exclusionary laws in the South in the past—are often seen as unjust by many members of society. The history of such movements includes sit-down strikes by the organizers of industrial unions, which led to quick union victories in 1937 by refusing to leave the building after work and thereby stopping production completely. Sit-ins at lunch counters by the civil rights movement in the 1960s led to the end of numerous state segregation laws, and a series of unexpected actions by LGBTQ groups in the 1980s and 1990s finally led to a faster and more complete reaction to the AIDS crisis. The LGBTQ activists also challenged laws that discriminated against members of their communities. These actions included crashing scientific forums, coming out to family, friends, and co-workers, and outing gays and lesbians in the executive branch or Congress who supported anti-LGBTQ legislation (Gross 1993).

Political campaigns are not the same as social movements, no matter how liberal, leftist, or ultraconservative they may be, because campaigns focus on winning elected offices. Nor are organized groups that try to influence specific pieces of legislation the same as social movements, no matter how vocal they may be. They work for their own narrow interests within traditional rules,
such as efforts by older citizens to defend or enhance Social Security. Due to the fact that social movements, electoral campaigns, and single-issue interest groups do not always have the same goals, and use different strategies and tactics, there are often tensions among them within the inclusionary alliance.

Until recently, the owners and managers of the largest banks and corporations in the country were the most influential members, and an important source of funding, within a formidable corporate-conservative alliance. This alliance includes a wide range of highly conservative religious organizations opposed to abortion, gay marriage, and a variety of other social initiatives put forth by liberals and other inclusionary activists. It also includes the National Rifle Association, which is adamant about protecting access to all types of guns, including advanced military weapons. However, ultraconservative organizations have become increasingly critical of corporate leaders for several reasons, including corporate support for diversity. Ultraconservatives also have been alienated by the criticisms several corporate leaders have made of their efforts to make exclusionary changes in voting laws in Republican-dominated states.

Due to the fact that most corporate leaders prefer gradual adaptation in the face of shifting circumstances—rather than constant strife, disruption, and possible violence—it is not clear what will happen to the corporate-conservative alliance in the 2020s. Corporate leaders have tended to support integration since the development of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. In the face of ultraconservative criticism of newly created corporate diversity programs in the 1970s, the corporate leaders nonetheless expanded them. These programs have led to more men of color, and women of all colors (including white), within the corporate managerial hierarchy, including 151 who served as chief executive officers (CEOs) in major corporations at various times between 2000 and 2020 (Zweigenhaft 2021b).

White conservative resistance to any compromises, and the strife that ensues, interfere with both corporate productivity and corporate sales. Corporations face a delicate balancing act in trying to satisfy all of their employees, shareholders, and customers. This may be especially the case for corporations that have to compete with corporations in Western Europe, Japan, and China. Although many corporate leaders have spoken out against the efforts of the exclusionary alliance to limit voting in future elections, it is not certain what role large corporations, and the corporate organizations to which they belong, will play in resolving one of the most contentious issues of the 2020s: the degree to which all citizens have full access to voting via a variety of avenues, and hence the degree to which the United States is a democratic country.

**Keeping Power and Politics in Perspective**

Although this book focuses on power and social conflict and discusses inclusionary activists and white nationalist ultraconservatives, it has to be kept in mind that there is a compelling nature to the satisfactions, joys, and routines
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of everyday life. People are drawn to their interactions and responsibilities with regard to loved ones and friends. They find enjoyment in activities outside of work, such as sports, hobbies, watching movies, playing or listening to music, and many other activities and forms of entertainment. Many people also gain satisfaction from doing their jobs, including blue-collar work, especially if they are given some degree of responsibility and autonomy, and receive secure health insurance and other social benefits. When looked at in this light, perhaps it is not surprising that the great majority of people stay within their everyday lives as much as they do.

The seeming apathy or ignorance often wrongly ascribed to most citizens actually makes personal sense. Time-consuming political meetings, which can lead to long arguments, and interpersonal tensions with like-minded individuals, take time away from family, friends, and the activities a person enjoys the most. Even when there is agreement on a new direction, it can take years to change policies at any level of government. To most people, it thus seems more sensible to focus on the many necessities and pleasures of everyday life, which also have the virtue of leading to feelings of personal accomplishment and satisfaction.

Put another way, when social scientists take the time to understand the situations in which various groups of people find themselves, they find that what people do makes sense, even though they are not always doing what activists and political candidates would like them to be doing (Flacks 1988). However, when people cannot live their everyday lives in the routine ways they prefer, due to threats to neighborhood stability by land developers, massive job layoffs due to economic downturns, or new legislation that may alter their lives in a negative way, then people pay attention and express themselves clearly. They look around for new leaders who make sense to them.

A Guide to What Follows

Because the analysis presented in this book may be new, counterintuitive, or controversial to some readers, it is useful to proceed in a deliberate fashion by defining each concept as it is introduced and then providing empirical examples of how each component of the overall social system works. By gradually developing the analysis in this manner, readers can draw their own conclusions at each step of the way, and decide for themselves if they think the analysis is at any point unconvincing or wrong.

Chapter 1 sets the stage for what follows by introducing an unfolding series of concepts and empirical findings relating, first, to the understanding of power and its paradoxical aspects, as well as the social-psychological dimension of power. It discusses what social scientists mean by social class, and how Americans perceive social classes due to the early history of the country. It then moves on to issues that cross-cut social classes: caste and colorism, which have been a part of America from the outset. The cultural reactions by those
who have been excluded due to caste and colorism are explained, as are the responses by many of those who resent and resist any changes to the current social system. The chapter compares the social science view of power with conspiratorial claims about power that have been part of the United States since its founding. The chapter concludes by introducing the three “indicators” of power that social scientists use as part of their efforts to understand the organization and distribution of power in large-scale societies.

Chapter 2 provides evidence for the existence of a nationwide corporate community. It includes Wall Street banks and stockbrokers, military contractors, accounting firms, and corporate law firms, as well as large and well-known corporations, such as Ford Motors, General Electric, IBM, and five large companies that grew very quickly in the past two or three decades: Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google, and Microsoft. The chapter also briefly discusses agribusinesses, family farm owners, and small business owners to show they are closely tied to the corporate community and present no challenge to it. It explains why most local businesses are organized into growth coalitions, which are focused on making local land more profitable. It also explains how the growth coalitions are able to dominate most city governments and to turn cities into growth machines. It discusses the several ways in which growth machines come into conflict with city neighborhoods and environmental activists on the one hand, and with the nationwide corporate community on the other hand. The chapter concludes by using several historical examples to demonstrate the limits on corporations’ control of their workforces.

Chapter 3 shows how the owners and top-level executives in the corporate community become a socially cohesive and clearly demarcated social upper class. This upper class has carved out high-status suburbs, built numerous gated communities within large cities, developed expensive private schools, and formed numerous exclusive social clubs over the past 125 years. In the process, its members have developed a distinctive sense that they are better than others. Their social bonds, along with their belief that they are superior to the non-rich, combine with their common economic interests to facilitate a sense of social cohesion. This social cohesion is important because it helps to facilitate policy cohesion when leaders within the corporate community meet to discuss how to implement government policies that are beneficial to them.

Chapter 4 demonstrates how the corporate community create, finance, and oversee numerous nonprofit foundations and think tanks. These foundations and think tanks work together to propose a wide range of policies and plans for dealing with newly emerging problems faced by the corporate community. The new potential policies are then discussed by corporate leaders in the privacy of four or five exclusive policy-discussion groups. They are joined in these discussions by the top officers in foundations and the experts from the thinks tanks. Each of these longstanding policy-discussion groups arose in response to one or another major crisis in the course of the twentieth century, such as the Great Depression, concerns about the need to expand the American economy to a worldwide basis after World War II, and the
sudden victories for labor unions in the midst of the Vietnam War in the late 1960s. As the foundations, think tanks, and policy-discussion groups drew closer together in the face of the Great Depression, they became a general policy-planning network. During the 1970s, the ultraconservative rich developed their own stand-pat network, which opposes any changes.

The mainstream policy-planning network provides corporate leaders with an understanding of general issues beyond the confines of their own narrow business problems. It prepares some of these leaders to serve as presidential appointments to the top offices in the executive branch of the federal government, such as the Department of State, the Treasury Department, and the Department of Defense. The policy-planning network also provides these leaders with the opportunity to meet, and make judgments about, the experts they invite to talk to their policy-discussion groups. Their familiarity with the views and styles of various experts gives them useful information for suggesting which experts should be asked to serve as advisors in the White House, and in executive departments of the federal government.

Chapter 5 describes how several of the organizations in the policy-planning network attempt to shape public opinion, especially in the midst of important conflicts over legislation. They do so by working with the public affairs departments of large corporations, large independent public relations firms, and various nonprofit organizations. These organizations, and the people who work within them, are part of the opinion-shaping network. This network has had little or no success in shaping the opinions held by the general public, but it has been quite successful in spreading doubt and calling for delays in the face of new legislative initiatives by liberals, environmental and climate activists, and trade-union leaders when such initiatives are opposed by the corporate community. The more benign nonprofits in the opinion-shaping network work with middle-class voluntary groups and often give them foundation grants. On the other hand, numerous small for-profit and nonprofit organizations within the opinion-shaping network make efforts to stigmatize, marginalize, and disrupt activist groups.

Chapter 6 explains the nature of the American electoral system, and why it is not as responsive to the preferences of the general public as are the electoral systems in other countries. It discusses the nature of the two major political parties and the conservative voting coalition developed by Southern Democrats and Northern Republicans. This voting coalition flourished for most of the years between 1880 and 1994, and created several of the legislative barriers to a more inclusionary democracy in the 2020s. In 1994, as also discussed in Chapter 6, Republicans took power in the South as well as in several non-Southern states, which made the conservative coalition into a single party and opened the door for an inclusionary Democratic Party. The chapter explains how campaign donations to members of both political parties fit into the larger picture. More generally, the chapter shows how American elections were reduced, at least until very recently, to a candidate-selection process, based on personalities and campaign finance, with
only a limited focus on the substantive policy issues that are more often a concern in elections in other democratic countries.

Chapter 7 examines the network-based processes through which the corporate community and its policy-planning network are able to dominate the federal government in Washington on issues of concern to them. It begins with a discussion of the *special-interest process*, and how it lobbies for tax breaks and subsidies for specific corporations, and tax cuts for the very rich. The chapter then examines the *policy-planning process*, which consists of the several avenues through which the proposals developed in the policy-planning network become government policy. It examines the social, educational, and occupational backgrounds of Cabinet appointments.

Chapter 7 also discusses the role of the Supreme Court as the ultimate protector of the interests of the corporate community, while at the same time gradually expanding individual rights over the course of the nearly 160 years between 1810 and 1968. The chapter also explains the ways in which the court’s decisions since 1970 have limited or undercut Congressional legislation protecting the rights of unions, people of color, and women of all colors. It documents the overwhelming presence of corporate lawyers on the Supreme Court, along with the full dominance of the court by ultraconservatives as the 2020s began, by a 6-3 majority. This strong majority has a variety of ways in which it could support state-level legislation that would limit, cut back, or effectively eliminate abortion rights, voter rights, union rights, and employee rights throughout the 2020s, even though a solid majority of Americans support these slowly won rights.

Chapter 8 attempts to provide a wider perspective in order to explain why the American power structure has taken the shape it has. It concludes there is *class domination* in the United States, which is not always the case in other highly developed countries. In the process, it deepens and extends several of the most important concepts and empirical findings discussed in earlier chapters. The chapter points out the historical reasons for the ascendancy of business and profit making over other concerns in the United States, which leads to greater power for the American corporate community than is held by their counterparts in other industrialized democracies. More generally, a few brief, painless historical comparisons with European countries highlight the fact that governments, armies, and churches have been much more important parts of the power structure in most European countries than they have been in the United States.

Chapter 8 concludes by demonstrating the constantly changing nature of power structures everywhere. The past can be analyzed and trends can be noted, but major events happen when they are least expected, such as the Great Depression, the unexpected impacts of World War II on all aspects of American society, the resurgence of the civil rights movement in the early 1960s, the rise of a new ultraconservative movement in the 1970s, the Great Recession of 2007–2009, and the sudden resurgence of inclusionary and social-justice issues after 2015.