



THE HIDDEN HEIST **TEXAS**

***Death Star and the Corporate
Coups on Democracy in Texas***

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INTRODUCTION

State Bans and the Rise of Corporate Power

Communities across the U.S. today face growing threats to our physical, environmental, and economic survival, along with increasingly brazen corporate and authoritarian power grabs. While the second Trump regime has pulled back the curtain on egregious levels of corporate and billionaire control over our democracy, decades of “business as usual” corporate interference (in both red and blue states) got us here. Long before Trump entered office for a second term, corporations have worked through industry groups to covertly buy, bully, and bamboozle lawmakers and the American public in order to rig the rules of our economy and democracy to line their pockets — while they hide in plain sight. And as scholars have noted, the deeply unequal economic conditions that corporations have shaped and continue to benefit from in our country are essential conditions enabling authoritarianism to take root.¹

An important but largely invisible piece of the corporate quest to control American homes, workplaces, and democracy has been the rise of state laws — pushed by corporations and their lobbyists — that prevent communities from passing local policies protecting us at work, at home, and in our neighborhoods in the face of corporate greed. Through the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) and industry lobbying groups, corporations have pushed these sweeping state bans — also referred to as “preemption” in some spaces — in all 50 states.² These corporate-driven state bans have grown at a rapid scale in recent years,³ undermining democracy and blocking local leaders and residents from working together to pass policies addressing basic needs for working families. Under state bans, essential protections like reasonable caps on rent, paid sick leave protections, incentives for affordable housing, and higher minimum wages have been stolen from millions of people.⁴

State bans have their roots in a white supremacist history, in which Southern white elites used state laws to suppress the political power and freedoms of Black people and thwart local efforts to advance more participatory, multiracial democracy.⁵ And this legacy continues in the racialized impacts of state bans today. Corporate-driven state bans harm the health and wellbeing of working people — especially working class communities of color — in myriad ways.⁶ The case studies in this report focus on state bans blocking local housing and workplace protections, which have disproportionately impacted communities of color, women, LGBTQ+ people, immigrants, and disabled people.⁷ And increasingly, ideologically driven politicians, their corporate allies, and billionaire donors are pushing state bans that overtly target the safety and fundamental freedoms of all of these groups in ever-more oppressive ways.⁸

Corporations have also used state bans — and the arena of state government — to test tactics they are now unleashing at the federal level to assert dangerous levels of control over our democracy while demolishing checks on their power and profit.⁹ Understanding this stealth strategy of corporate power — including the corporate actors behind these bans, the tactics they use, and how these bans have blocked our freedoms and derailed our democracy — is critical to fighting back against the corporate-backed authoritarianism harming us all.

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Texas and the Corporate Coup on Democracy

In solidly red states, the corporate stranglehold on state legislatures can be brazen, with unabashedly ideological forces working openly with lobbyists to advance and solidify corporate interests. Through decades of unchecked and conspicuous buying, bullying, and bamboozling, corporations and their allies have been able to advance sweeping bans on local policymaking that restrict nearly every avenue that working people have to stay safe and take care of their families.

State after state, corporations use a similar set of tactics in their efforts to strip working people of our rights. Industry groups representing our country's largest corporations drive bans on labor standards, while proclaiming to advocate for the interests of small, local businesses. Using the facade of "mom and pop shops" to justify bans on local policymaking, these groups obscure the mega-corporate money and influence directing an agenda that hurts communities and small businesses alike. And when communities successfully push back on these bans by establishing wins for working families at the local and state level, corporations and their allies have often employed egregious tactics to snatch hard-won policy gains — stealing wages and essential workplace protections and manipulating the tools of democracy to thwart the will of the people by any means available.

In Texas, the corporate quest to block regulation and quash community progress at the local level has reached egregious heights and set a dangerous precedent for the rest of the country. In 2023, major Texas corporations, billionaires, and their political champions built on years of carefully cultivated and richly funded state interference tactics to enact a sweeping state ban — nicknamed the "Death Star" bill — blocking local governments from governing on nearly every issue affecting the safety, wellbeing, and security of everyday Texans.¹¹ Years of unchecked spending and influence at the state legislature has created a landscape where corporations and their industry lobbying groups have been able to wield extreme levels of power over the daily lives of Texas residents. And the result is that local communities and their leaders have been essentially blocked from exercising their constitutionally-guaranteed freedom to govern on the most basic issues affecting local communities. This corporate coup has stranded Texas' working families without a myriad of protections typically set by cities & counties,¹² while enabling more ideologically-driven attacks on immigrants, LGBTQ+ people, and communities of color¹³ and an open season of corporate extraction from Texas' land, people, and waters.¹⁴

WHAT ARE STATE BANS?

State laws — often pushed by corporations, their industry groups, and lobbyists — that prevent local communities from passing policies that create essential protections for working people in one or more issue area. Referred to as "preemption" in some spaces, state bans have become a tried and true strategy of the corporate deregulation agenda by dismantling existing local policies that check their power and profit — like local minimum wage ordinances — and blocking future ones from taking effect. Bans may 1) block communities from setting local standards that go beyond state law on a specific issue; 2) put strict limitations on how communities can set standards on a specific issue, or which aspects of the issue they can regulate at the local level; or 3) block communities from setting local standards on a specific issue, even when no state standard exists — thus shutting communities out of protections entirely (beyond the bare minimum of what is required by federal law).

State bans now exist in all 50 states, including some form of affordable housing or workers' rights related ban.¹⁰ We define these bans as:

- ⚡ **Affordable housing bans:** any state bans that constrain communities' ability to pass local policies that support access to affordable housing — like rent stabilization, just cause eviction protections, and incentives for affordable housing.
- ⚡ **Workers' rights bans:** any state bans that constrain local communities' ability to pass policies that set baseline standards for working people — like minimum wage ordinances, paid leave requirements, and fair scheduling policies.

TEXAS' LEGACY OF TOXIC CORPORATE INTERFERENCE

Texas has long allowed individuals, Political Action Committees (PACs) and party committees to spend unlimited amounts of money on state political campaigns.¹⁵ Texas is home to the headquarters of 54 Fortune 500 multinational corporations,¹⁶ and these companies — Amazon,¹⁷ American Airlines,¹⁸ ExxonMobil,¹⁹ and Walmart,²⁰ as just a few examples — gave copiously to or have served on the boards of the industry groups who fund pro-corporate candidates and promote deregulation in the name of “free enterprise.”²¹ The state legislature, driven by industry groups like the Texas Association of Business (TAB), has turned to state bans again and again²² as a critical tool in their deregulation toolbox, driving bans on local rulemaking that allow corporations to exploit labor and undermine local communities while stamping out citizen resistance. Since 2002, when the Texas Association of Business identified opposition to living wages as among its top priorities,²³ corporate interests have pushed the state legislature to enact laws prohibiting local governments from: raising their local minimum wages above the state minimum,²⁴ enacting paid sick leave ordinances,²⁵ restricting hydraulic fracking within city limits,²⁶ protecting families from housing discrimination based on their source of income,²⁷ and regulating rideshare companies,²⁸ among other bans.

Given this history, it is no surprise that the same champions of unfettered corporate power would push the strategy of issue-specific state bans even further. In June 2023, Texas Governor Greg Abbott signed HB 2127 — the Texas Regulatory Consistency Act, better known as the “Death Star” bill — which voided city and county regulations covering eight broad areas of regulatory codes: agriculture, business and commerce, finance, insurance, labor, natural resources, occupations, and property. The sweeping bill prohibits local governments from adopting any rules within these areas, beyond what is already explicitly allowed by state law. In practice, this means everything from requiring that construction workers be allowed to take water breaks during soaring outdoor temperatures, to giving formerly incarcerated job applicants a fair chance at a hire, to protecting tenants from precipitous evictions, to

cities’ freedoms to enact environmentally-conscious waste management practices, can be overridden.²⁹ HB 2127 further allows anyone claiming to have been injured by a local ordinance prohibited by the legislation to sue the local government.³⁰

The state constitution allows cities to enact their own laws, yet the Death Star ban (HB 2127) clearly interferes with cities’ authority to self-govern.³¹ Following passage of the bill, cities including Houston, San Antonio and El Paso fought back in the courts. In August 2023, a Travis County District Judge agreed, finding the law unconstitutional.³² The state, however, immediately appealed that decision. And in July 2025, a Texas Third District Court of Appeals judge upheld the appeal, dismissing the cities’ lawsuit on procedural grounds.³³ The law had previously gone into effect on September 1, 2023, despite the legal challenges — putting communities in a tenuous position about their ability to pass ordinances, enforce existing policies, or issue administrative orders.³⁴

And since the July 2025 ruling, the Texas Public Policy Foundation (TPPF) — a right-wing, corporate-aligned driver of the Death Star ban — has led an accompanying legal assault to aggressively erode local governing power, recruiting local residents to file lawsuits against cities seeking to govern in any of the broad areas of policy banned by the bill.³⁵ TPPF recently sued the city of Dallas,³⁶ for example, over a list of 133 policies — including everything from LGBTQ+ employment protections to water conservation policies to minimum wage ordinances.³⁷ In chilling statements mocking the devastating impact of this legislation on local governing power, corporate-aligned lawmaker Dustin Burrows³⁸ (now Speaker of the House)³⁹ and TPPF attorney Nathan Seltzer celebrated the ruling in July 2025 by declaring that “the Death Star is Fully Operational.”⁴⁰ In a surreal bamboozle, TPPF and its allies have framed HB 2127 and the accompanying legal assault on cities as a “strike back against burdensome regulation,”⁴¹ likening the massive corporate interests behind the law and its dangerous impacts on millions of working people to “rebels” and “X-wing fighters.”⁴²

Death Star's Toll: Trapping Working Texans into Housing and Health Crisis, Driving Lethal Workplace Conditions

The Death Star ban represents the culmination of twenty years of corporate-driven state bans that block local leaders and their constituents from governing on some of the most important issues facing their communities. The impacts of the law are so wide-ranging that there are few areas of local democracy and governance left unaffected. In combination with the state's previous slew of corporate-driven bans, HB 2127 endangers Texas families across multiple fronts, banning labor protections that affect the safety, security, and dignity of millions of working people and threatening to eviscerate fair housing and tenant protections,⁴³ increasing the risk of eviction and homelessness for cost burdened renters. The impacts are especially high in a state where more than a quarter of the workforce are living on low wages,⁴⁴ and more families are uninsured than in any other US state.⁴⁵

HOUSING AND TENANT PROTECTIONS

More than half of Texas' 4.2 million renters are cost-burdened,⁴⁶ and the number of evictions in many of Texas' major cities is climbing.⁴⁷ Eviction rates in cities like Austin now greatly exceed pre-pandemic levels after slowing under state and federal moratoriums in 2020 and 2021.⁴⁸ Yet, in the midst of this eviction crisis, housing advocates say that HB 2127 may make it illegal for cities to require landlords to provide notice to tenants before initiating eviction proceedings.⁴⁹ The sweeping law also likely bans prohibitions on retaliation against tenants who, for example, file a housing complaint due to unsafe or hazardous living conditions.⁵⁰

Without just cause eviction protections or retaliation protections for renters — combined with the state's pre-existing ban on local rent stabilization⁵¹ — the health consequences of HB 2127 for cost-burdened renters are immense. Lack of retaliation protections makes it more likely that renters will endure unhealthy housing conditions for fear of being evicted if they request a repair.⁵² And without reasonable caps on rent, housing cost burden forces residents into impossible trade-offs, as they struggle to afford food, transportation, childcare, and doctor's visits while keeping a roof overhead. A large body of research links housing cost burden to overcrowding; lower housing and neighborhood quality; exposure to harmful pollutants; increased anxiety, financial stress and emotional strain; and lower educational attainment for children.⁵³ If rising rents displace residents out of their longtime neighborhoods, they may face worsening health due to loss of critical support networks and places of care, increased commutes, and stress.⁵⁴ And when landlords turn to eviction if tenants struggle to pay rent, a cascade of health consequences follows for entire families.⁵⁵ If evicted residents have nowhere to go — as a growing number of Texans are experiencing⁵⁶ — homelessness is devastating for both physical and mental health. Without the most basic of human needs, new health problems emerge and existing ones worsen.⁵⁷

PAID SICK LEAVE

Texas' Death Star ban builds on more than two decades of corporate-driven bans on wage and labor protections that have prohibited Texas cities from raising local minimum wages higher than the state wage, which has remained at \$7.25/hr since 2009.⁵⁸ And previous corporate-driven lawsuits resulted in court orders stripping paid sick leave protections from over 800,000 Texans in Dallas, San Antonio, and Austin.⁵⁹ Now, HB 2127 bans cities across the state from passing paid sick leave or other labor protections at the local level. With over four million Texans estimated to have no access to paid sick leave,⁶⁰ the cumulative impact of these corporate-backed bans have cut off millions across the state from the myriad health and economic benefits of paid sick leave.⁶¹ Lack of paid sick leave in turn can lead to delayed or inaccessible medical care, worsening health conditions, higher stress, increased risk of complications and death from

illness, and higher rates of infectious disease transmission.⁶²

HEAT PROTECTIONS

And critically, the Death Star ban could strike down labor protections against heat exposure on the job, significantly increasing the risk of heat-borne illness and death for over three million Texans who work outside, who are also more likely to be Black or Latine.⁶³ People working outdoors in the United States have up to 35 times the risk of dying from heat exposure than the general population,⁶⁴ and climate change is projected to quadruple exposure to hazardous outdoor heat conditions over the next forty years.⁶⁵ Texas has no statewide heat regulations, and HB 2127 likely blocks local ordinances in Austin and Dallas that had successfully mandated water breaks for construction workers since 2010 and 2015, respectively.⁶⁶ Terribly but unsurprisingly, Texas is the state where the most working people die from high temperatures; 2023 marked an unprecedented year in heat deaths in Texas, with 334 Texans dying from extreme heat, more than any other year on record.⁶⁷ Driven by corporate interests, Texas legislators have not only failed to protect these Texans with a statewide standard but have prohibited local governments from doing so — literally forcing working Texans in a death trap of rapidly rising temperatures.

ANTI-DISCRIMINATION PROTECTIONS

The Death Star ban also threatens to roll back local anti-discrimination protections in housing and workplaces, with lawsuits already targeting protections for LGBTQ+ people, a group not currently protected under Texas state law.⁶⁸ Anti-discrimination protections are critical for physical, mental, and economic wellbeing.⁶⁹ In a climate of escalating hostility and threats against queer and trans people across the state and nationwide, potential erosion of local anti-discrimination protections could have devastating impacts for the safety and security of Texas' 1.3 million LGBTQ+ people.⁷⁰ Meanwhile, the potential impact of HB 2127 on local anti-discrimination protections more broadly could create new obstacles to upholding the rights of immigrants, disabled people, and people of color, among other communities affected by anti-discrimination protections.⁷¹

THE TEXAS VILLAINS

The national industry groups behind state bans in Texas:

US CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

The US Chamber of Commerce (parent organization to the Texas Association of Business) is the world's largest business organization,⁷² governed by a board that includes representatives from some of our country's largest corporations — including Pfizer, Shell, ConocoPhillips, Hilton, Meta, Microsoft, and Comcast.⁷³ The Chamber has been a primary driver of the corporate deregulation agenda for decades and lobbies against nearly every kind of state and local policy protecting working people,⁷⁴ while advancing corporate interests at all levels of government. While the Chamber regularly argues against a “patchwork of regulation” in its efforts to push state bans on local policies,⁷⁵ its state affiliates have blocked community-driven efforts to create uniform statewide standards that improve wages and labor protections for working people.⁷⁶ The Chamber's state and local affiliates have also fought affordable housing and tenant protection policies in Colorado⁷⁷ and Tennessee.⁷⁸ The US Chamber alone spent \$76.3 million on lobbying in 2024, not including spending by its statewide and local chapters.⁷⁹

NATIONAL FEDERATION OF INDEPENDENT BUSINESS

The National Federation of Independent Business (NFIB) describes itself as the “voice of small business,”⁸⁰ while lobbying in support of major corporate interests and against government regulation in DC and all 50 state capitals. NFIB is notorious for its campaign to weaken workers' rights to compensation when injured on the job⁸¹ and has actively driven state bans on wage and labor protections in states like Tennessee,⁸² Missouri,⁸³ and Texas, as discussed in this memo. In Texas, NFIB is a key organization behind the Alliance for Securing and Strengthening the Economy in Texas (ASSET),⁸⁴ a coalition of industry groups formed specifically to push bans on labor regulations in the state.⁸⁵ Despite claiming to advocate for the interests of small mom-and-pops, NFIB has been influenced and funded by major corporations and billionaire industrialists. In 2012, for example, the NFIB received \$1.5 million from Freedom Partners Chamber of Commerce, a conservative advocacy group with close ties to the Koch brothers' empire.⁸⁶ And in 2010, the NFIB received \$3.7 million from Crossroads GPS,⁸⁷ a conservative advocacy group advised by Karl Rove⁸⁸ that has received millions in donations from fossil fuel corporations like Alliance Resource Partners, Clayton Williams Energy, and individuals from BP Capital and Petco Petroleum.⁸⁹

STATE POLICY NETWORK

A right-wing, corporate-aligned network of think tanks and non-profits with members and affiliates in all 50 states,⁹⁰ the State Policy Network (SPN, affiliated with the Texas Public Policy Foundation⁹¹) and its members serve as the policy, research, and legal complement to ALEC's policy agenda.⁹² SPN

describes itself as “dedicated to state-based, free-market policy” and has been an advocate of weakening unions (through so-called “right to work” laws), privatizing education, and rolling back labor and environmental regulations. And SPN’s affiliates and partners often directly author or influence ALEC’s model bills that get pushed by industry groups in states across the country.⁹³ The State Policy Network was founded in the 1980s by a Reagan administration advisor and Trustee of The Heritage Foundation.⁹⁴ Its current board of directors includes Project 2025 authors, including representatives from The Heritage Foundation and corporate affiliated groups like the Adolph Coors Foundation,⁹⁵ which funds projects in alignment with “traditional Judeo-Christian values.”⁹⁶ Despite its website proclaiming that “when policy is local, it takes into account unique community conditions...and thereby leads to better outcomes for more of the people it governs,”⁹⁷ SPN’s affiliates have been key drivers of state bans eroding the local governing power of communities, harming working people across the country.

THE CORPORATE PLAYBOOK: BUY, BULLY, BAMBOOZLE

THE TACTICS CORPORATIONS USE TO PUSH STATE BANS FALL INTO THREE PRIMARY BUCKETS. OFTEN, CORPORATIONS USE A COMBINATION OF ALL THREE:



BUY

Corporations pour funds into amassing political power over lawmakers and voters — like writing campaign checks and hiring pricey lobbyists — and leverage this influence to ban policies that protect community wellbeing.



BULLY

Corporations use legal, economic, and other threats — like lawsuits, raising prices, or leaving town — to pressure elected officials and community members into banning policies that hold them accountable.



BAMBOOZLE

Corporations push misleading information — like political ads and talking points about how tenant protections hurt working people — to sway lawmakers and community members against policies that check corporate power.

The Corporate Playbook Behind Texas' Death Star Ban

Industry associations funded and controlled by some of the world's largest corporations pushed HB 2127 through the Texas legislature, securing the allegiance of lawmakers through lobbying and campaign contributions, and disseminating disingenuous and conflicting talking points to misinform the public about the bill's impacts. Building on the state's long history of bans, corporate interests used nearly every tool in the corporate playbook to disempower local communities and block policies to improve the lives of Texas families.



BUY: SPENDING BIG TO BAN IT ALL

The Texas Public Policy Foundation (TPPF) took a lead role in promoting the Death Star ban in 2023, testifying for the bill before the legislature,¹⁰⁸ issuing a slew of releases praising the law,¹⁰⁹ and hosting an interview with its House sponsor (and now Speaker of the House)¹¹⁰ Dustin Burrows.¹¹¹ That year, the organization spent up to \$900,000 on lobbying,¹¹² among the highest of organizations pushing for the ban. As a non-profit, TPPF is prohibited from engaging in electoral activity. Its board members, however, are major Republican donors on both the federal and state level,¹¹³ steering contributions in Texas to lawmakers who passed HB 2127. Together all TPPF directors¹¹⁴ have given well over \$100,000 to the Death Star ban's sponsors and cosponsors since 2020,¹¹⁵ including TPPF Vice Chair Tim Dunn — a billionaire who made his profits off the oil and gas industry and has pushed policies and funded groups aligned with White Christian Nationalism at the state and federal level.¹¹⁶

TPPF had heavy-hitting allies pushing for the all-encompassing ban on local policymaking. The Texas Association of Business (TAB), which is the Texas State Chamber of Commerce, spent up to \$250,000 on lobbying the legislature in 2023, and local Chambers spent up to \$1.6 million.¹¹⁷ NFIB made HB 2127 its priority legislation in 2023.¹¹⁸ It spent up to \$505,450 on lobbying in Texas in 2023,¹¹⁹ and positioned small business owners in front of the legislature to testify on behalf of the bill.¹²⁰ NFIB is also the anchor organization behind the Alliance for Securing and Strengthening the Economy in Texas,¹²¹ or ASSET, a coalition of industry groups formed specifically to push bans on labor regulations in the state.¹²² ASSET's members engaged heavily in lobbying in 2023,¹²³ and together they have given over \$400,000 in campaign contributions to the Death Star ban's sponsors and cosponsors between 2020-2024.¹²⁴

TPPF: TEXAS' BUY, BULLY, BAMBOOZLE "THINK TANK"

An affiliate of the conservative State Policy Network,⁹⁸ the Texas Public Policy Foundation (TPPF) has taken a lead role in promoting state bans in Texas, including the sweeping Death Star ban. TPPF is a right-wing think tank based in Austin with extensive ties to the Texas legislature and increasing influence over national policy. Former CEO Brooke Rollins is now Trump's Secretary of Agriculture.⁹⁹ Her successor as CEO, Kevin Roberts,¹⁰⁰ now serves as president of the ultra-conservative Heritage Foundation,¹⁰¹ which organized the extremist Project 2025 policy road map now being implemented by the second Trump regime. TPPF advocates for a range of corporate-serving and ideologically-driven issues including eliminating property taxes, "DEI bans" at public universities, hardline immigration policies, and defunding public education through private school vouchers.¹⁰² Oil and gas billionaire Tim Dunn currently serves as TPPF Vice Chairman,¹⁰³ and has been on the board since at least 2000.¹⁰⁴ Dunn is heavily involved in efforts to push policies and fund groups aligned with White Christian Nationalism, including spending at least \$30 million since 2010 to back efforts restricting abortion and sending taxpayer money to private schools.¹⁰⁵ Dunn has also worked methodically over the years to push Texas towards a Christian theocracy.¹⁰⁶ TPPF does not disclose its funding sources, but leaked donor lists have included fuel companies like Exxon Mobil, ConocoPhillips, and the conglomerate Koch Industries, along with other major Texas-based multinationals like USAA and AT&T.¹⁰⁷

Outside of the ASSET coalition, associations representing a range of industries registered support for the Death Star ban,¹²⁵ while spending heavily on lobbying and campaign contributions. Unsurprisingly, HB 2127 supporters included numerous fossil fuel trade groups,¹²⁶ backed by some of the largest corporations in the country including ExxonMobil, Chevron, and ConocoPhillips.¹²⁷ The Texas Oil & Gas Association — just one of the many groups representing the state's fossil fuels interests — spent up to \$325,000 on lobbying in 2023,¹²⁸ and the association has given \$76,000 to the Death Star ban's sponsors and cosponsors since 2020.¹²⁹ (The industry even had its own representative among the bill's sponsors in Senator Mayes Middleton, president of Middleton Oil.¹³⁰) Other HB 2127 supporters included the Independent Bankers Association of Texas (IBAT),¹³¹ which spent up to \$778,390 on lobbying in 2023,¹³² and Airlines for America,¹³³ a trade group that receives over \$5 million in annual dues from Fort Worth-based American Airlines.¹³⁴



BULLY: THREATS AND LAWSUITS

In pushing HB 2127 through the legislature, the bill's supporters drew on the same buy, bully, bamboozle tactics they've employed throughout their two-decade drive to ban local policies that hold corporations accountable. The Death Star ban was essentially written so that private lawsuits would be the implementation plan. Since the law was adopted, TPPF has recruited residents claiming to be "injured" by local ordinances to sue cities like Dallas¹³⁵ as a way to bully them into rolling back scores of policies that may stand in contrast to the new state law. And corporate interests have used the tactic of exploiting the courts for years to block cities from enacting labor policy under previous state bans. Dallas,¹³⁶ Austin¹³⁷ and San Antonio¹³⁸ all passed sick leave laws between 2018-2019, but business interests mounted legal challenges against each ordinance. In Austin, TPPF brought the lawsuit against the city on behalf of a coalition of city businesses and associations including the TAB, NFIB, and the American Staffing Association.¹³⁹ As a result of the lawsuit, the cities were prohibited from implementing their ordinances under the state's minimum wage ban,¹⁴⁰ denying sick leave to hundreds of thousands of people in these cities.¹⁴¹ The legal ambiguity of HB 2127 acts as a bully in and of itself — leaving communities in the dark about which policies may be struck down in the courts and threatening under-resourced cities with the potential of exorbitantly expensive lawsuits if they don't roll back local ordinances that may stand in conflict with the sweeping state ban.

UBER AND LYFT: TEXTBOOK TEXAS BULLIES

Uber and Lyft provide a textbook example of the corporate bully tactic in Texas, with the companies threatening to suspend operations if rideshare regulations were passed.¹⁴² After muscling their way into metropolitan areas at the expense of traditionally regulated taxi services, Uber and Lyft spent millions to beat back driver background check regulations enacted by Houston and Austin in 2014 and 2015.¹⁴³ In Austin, the companies funded a PAC¹⁴⁴ that forced the city to hold a 2016 ballot referendum on the ordinance. But even after Uber and Lyft waged the most expensive campaign in city history,¹⁴⁵ voters rejected the proposal to weaken the regulations. Following the vote, Uber and Lyft suspended operations in the city, leaving passengers and drivers high and dry.¹⁴⁶ But the companies were still working behind the scenes, flooding the state legislative caucuses with campaign donations¹⁴⁷ and waging a lobbying crusade.¹⁴⁸ In May 2017, the legislature passed HB 100, overriding the local measures enacted in Houston and Austin.¹⁴⁹ As soon as Governor Greg Abbott signed the bill on May 29, 2017, Uber and Lyft immediately resumed operations in Austin.¹⁵⁰



BAMBOOZLE: HYPOCRITICAL RHETORIC AND DEADLY CORPORATE DOUBLESPEAK

The rhetoric employed by the Death Star ban's promoters reveals the corporate double-speak that often accompanies the push for state bans. Supporters of state bans like NFIB and the TAB, for example, repeatedly parroted the talking point that HB 2127 would address the “patchwork of regulation” created by local lawmaking.¹⁵¹ If a consistent standard was really the goal, however, Texas lawmakers would adopt baseline labor, environmental and tenant safeguards. Yet, thanks to numerous corporate bans, Texas is notorious for lacking worker protections at the state level.¹⁵² Rather than a concern for consistent standards, the only true concern of Texas' corporate actors is about blocking regulation and banning higher standards for working people altogether.

Similarly, TPPF and its allies back so-called “tort reform” in Texas, in an ongoing attempt to shield corporations from liability.¹⁵³ Billionaire executives in Texas (now including Elon Musk, who gave a million dollars to Texans for Lawsuit Reform in 2024)¹⁵⁴ have sought to roll back the right to sue businesses since the 1990s and 2000s.¹⁵⁵ Yet the Death Star ban not only prohibits local autonomy but weaponizes the courts. The law seeks to intimidate cities by allowing anyone claiming to have been injured by a local ordinance, now prohibited by HB 2127, to sue, leaving cash-strapped localities in fear of financial ruin due to lawsuits.¹⁵⁶

As another example, HB 2127's supporters cry foul when the federal government overrides the states,¹⁵⁷ yet the same actors push state bans to impose state control over local governments. Austin City Council member Zohaib Qadri reflected in 2023, “there used to be a strong emphasis on local control in Texas,” but “Texas lawmakers beholden to corporate donors are overstepping and interfering with cities, counties, and other local jurisdictions.”¹⁵⁸ As scholars have noted, corporate interests and their political allies — in Texas and beyond — have focused on state government and state bans less out of a consistent ideological allegiance to state government per se, but rather based on their relative ability to manipulate this level of government towards their deregulatory aims.¹⁵⁹ And importantly, this focus has shifted over time in response to evolving political conditions. This hypocrisy is reflected on the website of the national State Policy Network (SPN), the larger network that TPPF is connected to. SPN's Center for Practical Federalism proclaims on its website that “when policy is local, it takes into account unique community conditions...and thereby leads to better outcomes for more of the people it governs.”¹⁶⁰ And yet, SPN's affiliates like TPPF have driven state bans eroding the governing power of local communities on a wide swath of issues across the country.¹⁶¹ And today, we are witnessing an unprecedented concentration of corporate and executive power at the federal level under the second Trump regime alongside a massive campaign of deregulation,¹⁶² aided by numerous Texas corporate power brokers.¹⁶³

When Texans object to the corporate power grab, lobbyists go straight to the bamboozle. During the corporate push for the Death Star ban, the issue of water breaks for outdoor workers broke through in the press, as labor advocates noted the legislation would ban local ordinances mandating water breaks during periods of extreme heat.¹⁶⁴ Put on the defensive, the bill's supporters released a barrage of misinformation to distract the public from the law's intended effects. The Texas Association of Business, for example, responded with false indignation: “No business in Texas committed to operating ethically and keeping its employees safe would ever deprive its workers of the fundamental necessity of staying hydrated. The notion that any of our businesses would even consider doing so is a direct affront to...the broader Texas business community.”¹⁶⁵ Meanwhile, previously passed local ordinances requiring water breaks for outdoor workers in Austin and Dallas led to significant decreases in heat-related

illness and death.¹⁶⁶ Based on construction worker surveys, these ordinances increased the likelihood that a construction worker received a water break by 35%.¹⁶⁷ These findings demonstrate how essential employer mandates are protecting worker safety on the job. And since HB 2127 was passed, heat deaths have only been on the rise — including a record number of heat deaths (334) in 2023 including workers in construction, mail delivery, and utilities who perished in dangerously hot conditions.¹⁶⁸

The Associated Builders and Contractors claimed that local rules demanding heat breaks impose a rigid scheme that, unlike Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) guidelines, do not allow the flexibility needed to tailor breaks to individual job site conditions: “These ordinances just add confusion and encourage people to do the minimum instead of doing the right thing.”¹⁶⁹ OSHA, however, does not have a national standard for preventing heat-related illnesses; instead, they cite workplaces for over-exposure to heat after an employee injury or death has occurred.¹⁷⁰ The hypocrisy of these corporate bamboozles is especially profound, as the same industry lobby groups that claim to support federal standards have also kept heat protections out of national labor law and attempted to weaken OSHA at every turn.¹⁷¹



UNCHECKED CORPORATE POWER: THE END GAME

The passage of Texas' Death Star ban was the culmination of a decades-long drive to undo basic labor, environmental and consumer standards. A network of multinational corporations, right-wing think tanks and ideological billionaire CEOs pushed issue-specific state bans to their logical extreme, with HB 2127 banning Texas cities from taking action across a vast swath of regulatory areas. Since being upheld in the courts, this ban now seemingly prohibits local governments from regulating everything from predatory lending practices¹⁷² to oil and gas burns within communities,¹⁷³ to essential protections for people at home and on the job.¹⁷⁴ The chilling effect of HB 2127 on democracy itself can't be understated — as local communities' voices are silenced and leaders closest to their constituents are afraid to establish new protections for fear of massively expensive lawsuits.¹⁷⁵



CONCLUSION

Texans' experience of corporate assault on their workplace safety, economic security, and political voice reflects the growing levels of corporate control over our economy and democracy more broadly. Across the country, people's basic needs are being pushed out of reach while our avenues for protecting ourselves and improving the conditions of our daily lives are increasingly restricted by corporate interference. And no matter where we live, the same set of corporations are very often working through state industry groups to buy, bully, and bamboozle our lawmakers into governing in ways that favor corporate profit over public good.¹⁷⁶

As our communities grapple with the transformative changes needed to truly push back on the corporate-authoritarian stranglehold on American life, exposing and disrupting the corporate playbook that got us here will be paramount. Indeed, state government has been — and continues to be — a pivotal testing ground for the current federal regime. After working for decades to push state bans on local policymaking — and proclaiming the superiority of state government — corporations are now recycling the same buy, bully, and bamboozle tactics they've honed at the state level to push for federal bans on state regulations. Major tech corporations have spent at least \$100 million to influence federal lawmakers and argued against a "patchwork of regulation" in their efforts to block state governments from creating regulations to protect people from the myriad potential harms of AI,¹⁷⁷ for example. And many of the same corporations and billionaire CEOs in industry groups behind state bans across the country have unapologetically aligned with Trump's authoritarian agenda through contracts enabling mass surveillance, kidnappings and detentions by ICE,¹⁷⁸ unquestioned rollbacks of DEI policies,¹⁷⁹ and directly funding Trump's personal projects.¹⁸⁰ And it's no coincidence Texas' corporate power grab has foreshadowed the federal assault on worker, environmental, human, and civil rights of all kinds. The very same architects of Texas' corporate capture are some of the most influential designers and advisors to Trump's second regime.¹⁸¹

Collectively, we must expose the corporations that have plundered our lives and banned our freedom for too long. Familiarizing ourselves with their false claims, tired talking points, egregious buys, and dirty threats can equip us to better fight back. Corporations developed these tactics to curtail the power of everyday people. Yet we have seen that when communities organize across race, class, gender, and geography to defy corporate greed and authoritarian power grabs, we can push corporations to end their complicity in attacks on our communities and reverse the march towards autocracy. Together, we can make their playbook a losing game and build an economy and democracy that truly serves the people and our needs, not corporations and their greed.

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