Opinion **US politics & policy**

Americans feel they have lost their agency

People increasingly blame large corporations for the sense that they have ever less control over their own lives

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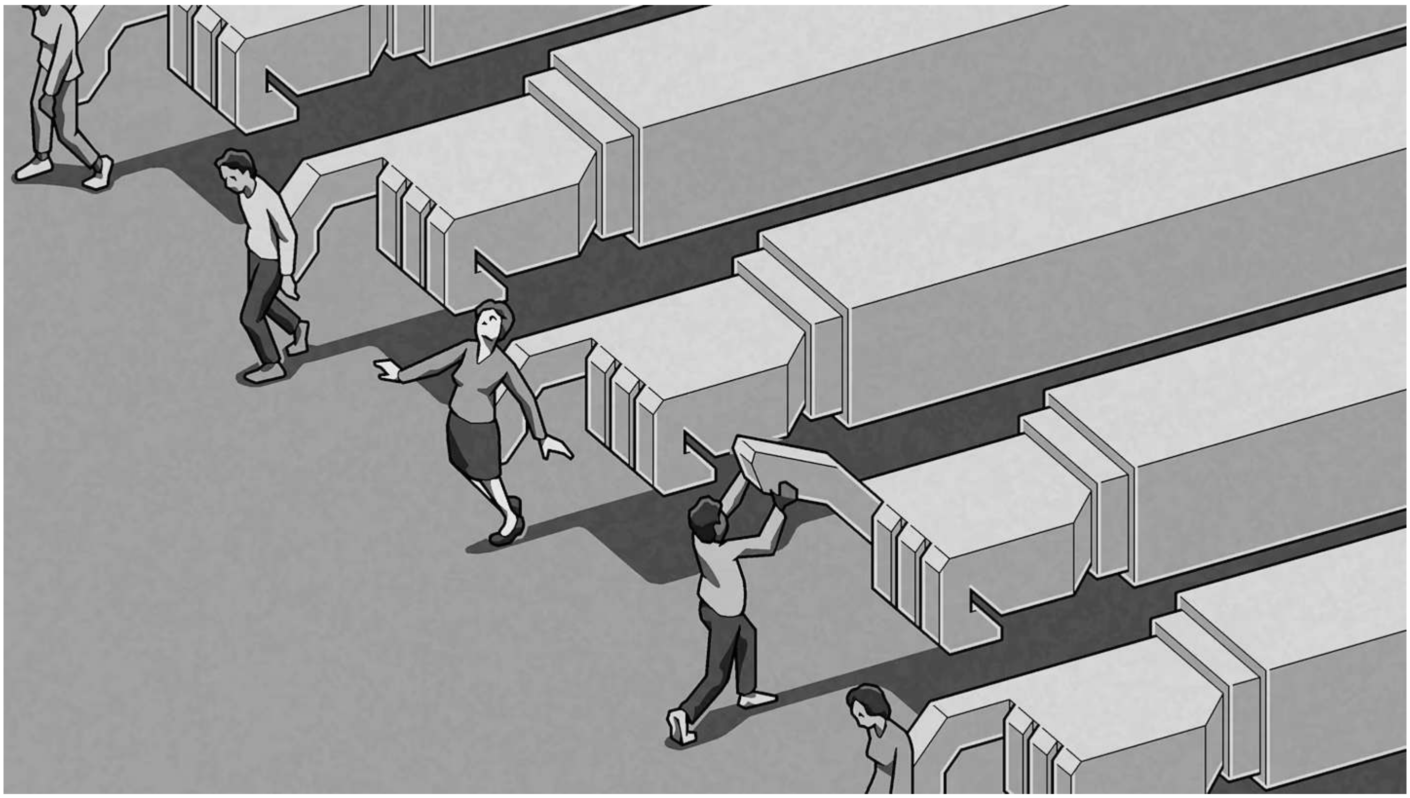

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Last week's $18bn Meta settlement, which will force the social media giant to put time limits and other major restrictions on how teens use Facebook and Instagram, marks an inflection point in the backlash that has been building against Big Tech. It follows on the heels of TikTok's $400mn settlement for the alleged violation of children's privacy laws earlier this month, and agreements by Amazon and Google on consumer protection and monopoly power.

All of this is a legal manifestation of a larger political trend — Americans feel they have less and less control over their own lives, and they increasingly blame large corporations.

AI and data centres have been the tipping point. According to the Annenberg Public Policy Center, 61 per cent of Americans now oppose one being built in their backyard. The politics of the upcoming midterm elections reflect this, with candidates from both parties trying to portray politicians who favour the building of data centres as in hock to big corporations.

“The data centre issue is the latest example of a governor who has been doing the bidding of moneyed interests instead of the people of Texas,” said Democratic gubernatorial candidate Gina Hinojosa about her opponent. And it’s a sentiment being echoed in races across the country.

But the deep issue here is Americans’ perceived loss of personal agency, a problem that has been building for decades.

Algorithmic control of many of our consumer choices is simply a fact of life today. When we search Google or shop on Amazon, we are presented with pre-curated choices that lead us to certain conclusions that benefit the companies that designed the online worlds where we now spend most of our time. A mere 0.44 per cent of users ever look beyond the first Google search page. AI, of course, only amplifies the effect by putting even more distance between us and any original source material.

None of this began with Silicon Valley, as Eli Cook shows in his upcoming book, *Choose Your Captivity: How Corporations Built Our Choices and Sold Our Freedom*. He describes how digital rabbit holes that take us where their creators want us to go (and where it is most profitable for them) are merely the high-tech culmination of the past 100 years of corporate “choice architecture” of the sort that “hardly existed before the turn of the 20th century and yet now dominate us more and more each year”.

Cook would include in this list everything from “pay to play” supermarket display shelves invented in the 1920s, to taste tests like the 1970s Pepsi Challenge, to pain questionnaires pushed into doctors’ offices in the 2000s by Purdue Pharma (the maker of OxyContin), to the highly curated and controlled environment of platforms like Uber and Netflix today.

All of it not only played to corporate interests, allowing companies to shape the entire choice ecosystem, but also a neoliberal belief that "economic standing was largely a reflection of . . . personal decisions not class inequalities, structural conditions or blind luck", as Cook puts it. We could do and be anything we wanted — we just had to make the right choices.

But what if we don't even have a choice? What if, to allude to the title of a very influential economics book published in 2008, we are simply being "nudged" towards a place that big businesses, which can afford the best surveillance and behaviour-shaping technologies, want you to be? And what if those nudges aren't about improving wellbeing, as that book's authors Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler proposed, but making the rich richer? It might make average voters question the entire nature of democratic capitalism.

That appears to be just what is happening. In the past few years, the American dream of free choice and upward mobility has been called into question. One 2025 survey found only 31 per cent of the population believed that "if you work hard, you will get ahead".

A recent report by political scientist Jared Abbott and legal scholar Joan C Williams advised that any winning left-of-centre politics should "consistently embrace a populism that decries a rigged economy where hard work fails to yield a stable middle-class life".

This is, of course, just what we are hearing in the midterm cycle, often from labour and faith-oriented candidates, who align with institutions (unions, the church) that offer alternatives to corporate power structures. As James Talarico, the Democratic candidate for US Senate from Texas, put it on *The Ezra Klein Show*: "The billionaires who own our algorithms, who own our cable news networks . . . they and their platforms are engineering our emotions so they can profit off our pain. They are selling us conflict, and they're calling it connection." He went on to say that billionaires are "bad for the world . . . bad for our neighbours . . . and bad for Texans". Talarico is strongly ahead in polls in a state where Democrats haven't won a Senate race since 1988.

It will take more than rhetoric and a few lawsuits to reverse surveillance capitalism. But it's worth remembering that the concept of "freedom", even when it is a myth, is precious to most Americans. Companies — and politicians — perceived to be undermining it may ultimately suffer.

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