Activists have failed to persuade corporations to behave in a more socially responsible manner because pressure groups have focused on influencing company policies at the expense of pushing for regulatory change, Aaron Chatterji and Siona Listokin argue in the left-leaning journal “Democracy.”

Environmentalists and labor advocates have scored small victories — persuading Home Depot to sell more environmentally friendly wood and Nike to improve conditions for factory workers — but have failed to bring about broader reforms, they contend.

Despite having a $5 million budget, activist group Wal-Mart Watch hasn’t been able to boost employee pay and benefits or give unions a toehold at the retailer. Similarly, voluntary industry standards established by pressure groups — such as those for fair-trade coffee and conditions in factories — are often sufficiently vague that corporations can ignore them without risking alienating consumers.

The authors suggest that people interested in business practices should devote the majority of resources to their pre-1990s strategy: lobbying for government regulation, rather than attempting to cajole or threaten profit-oriented corporations into doing what they don’t want to do. – Robin Moroney