

How to Take the Money Out of Politics

Something that Senator Bernie Sanders often said during his 2016 presidential campaign was that billionaires were buying our elections. While this isn't entirely true, it's emblematic of the progressive movement towards campaign finance reform. The issue with privately funded elections, such as those in the US, is not that it allows the wealthy to determine the outcome of the election, but that when most political campaigns rely on big donors politicians govern with their best interests in mind, rather than that of the people. While this is not directly quid pro quo bribery, it does allow for corruption. And it's only getting worse. With the introduction of super PACs, or independent-expenditure only committees, more money is being poured into our elections than ever. As campaigns grow longer and more expensive, many politicians rely even more on special interest groups and upper class people. To move towards publicly funded elections, rather than privately funded ones, in order to reduce corruption, we must begin on a small scale; we must push for local and state level initiatives, starting with "Democracy Vouchers" that encourage the people to get involved with campaign finance, giving more power to the populous, and allowing publicly financed elections to be tested within our legal system, so that by the time it has reached the supreme court the process will be robust enough to be deemed constitutional.

Since the 1970's our government has been trying to regulate campaign finance. In 1974, the Federal Elections Commission was created to regulate and limit the amount of money going into elections. In 2002 through the McCain-Feingold Act, congress tried to create a ban on soft money, money spent indirectly supporting a candidate, often on advertising and other campaign expenditures. However, this was deemed unconstitutional, as spending money on political campaigns was considered part of our right to free speech. As a result of the supreme court's controversial Citizens United ruling many organizations were created using unlimited amounts of money on independent expenditures. The result of millions and millions of dollars going into our elections is that policy is shaped by the wealthy and the special interest groups. Studies have shown that public opinion may play no role at all in how foreign policy decisions are made. Defense companies such as Northrup Grumman, Lockheed Martin, and Boeing, spend some of the largest amounts of money donating to politics. War profiteers are going to be more likely to encourage defense spending than the population at large. This type of influence is detrimental to our democracy as a whole.

How can we possibly combat this? The solution does not begin with federal regulation on campaign financing, as this was already attempted and was unsuccessful and was deemed unconstitutional. The solution means starting small. During the 2016 presidential race, Senator Bernie Sanders ran for the democratic party, and relied on

small donations averaging about 27 dollars. He had little support from super PAC's, so his campaign was largely funded by small donations coming directly from his supporters. This gives us hope that it is possible for individuals making small donations to make an impact and give a candidate who doesn't support certain industries/special interests a fighting chance in an election. Knowing that small donations can have a large impact, Seattle began an initiative giving every citizen 100 dollars in vouchers that can be spend donating to the politician of their choosing. While it is not certain exactly how this initiative has shaped election outcomes or policies in a direct way, it does get the conversation surrounding campaign finance started, and it is a good first step in moving from privately funded elections to publicly funded ones. Places in Oregon should start doing the same, and by spreading the word to their neighboring counties, the movement may expand to a state-wide level eventually.

Not only will public discourse occur surrounding the issue occur, but also the process will be refined as it is challenged legally, shaping it into a robust system of publicly financing elections. By the time the movement has spread to the majority of the states, should it get so far, it will be suitable to be tried by the supreme court, and, if it's deemed constitutional, it will then become federal law. This course of action follows that of other successful movements in recent history, such as the one advocating for same sex marriage, and the one for increasing the rights of gun-owners. They too started as small grass-roots initiatives, and state by state they won the country over. For campaign finance reform, we should do the same.

Many may argue that the way our elections are funded does not affect the way policy is shaped, as there is no direct bribery or corruption occurring. The wealthy cannot decide who wins and who doesn't. Sometimes candidates with less funding are able to win elections, so some argue that this means that campaign finance is not in need of reformation. This fails to consider the political access, and inherent influence that political donors receive as a result of their money.

The invisible hand of the market has gotten a hold on our democracy, and its grip only grows tighter. As it is not feasible to reverse several decades of precedent, and instantaneously regulate political spending from corporations, unions, and the ultra-wealthy, we must start small and attempt to give the people equal footing in the decision of "who is allowed to run for office." By encouraging the small political donations, we slowly remove the influence of special interest on government, as their money is no longer what politicians rely on. Our democracy, can be fixed, we just have to patience and coordination

Works Cited

<https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2018/5/7/17325486/citizens-united-money-politics-dark-money-vouchers-primaries>
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/how-to-reverse-citizens-united/471504/>
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/03/27/policymakers-are-ignoring-us-but-no-more-than-usual/?utm_term=.da544ca5fe4b
<https://www.opensecrets.org/>
<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-us-government-and-politics/political-participation/campaign-finance/a/lesson-summary-campaign-finance>
<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/21/opinion/l21brooks.html>
http://cfinst.org/congress/pdf/Table4_PostElec.pdf
<https://www.theguardian.com/public-leaders-network/2012/sep/03/public-opinion-influence-policy>