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How to Take the Money Out of Politics

Throughout his 2016 presidential campaign, Bernie Sanders often declared that billionaires are buying our elections. While this is not entirely accurate, the effectiveness of his rhetoric is emblematic of the progressive movement towards campaign finance reform. However, contrary to Sanders' assessment, the issue with privately funded elections is not a specific loophole, a specific court ruling, or a specific cut and dry example of bribery, but an inherent flaw altogether. The wealthy do not determine the outcome of elections, but when most political campaigns rely on big donors, politicians govern with their best interests in mind, rather than the interests of the people. While this is not directly quid pro quo bribery, it does promote a mild and ever-growing corruption. As more money fuels our politics, we advance closer to corporate self-governance. With the introduction of "Super-PACS", or independent-expenditure only committees, more money is being poured into our elections than ever. There is a price tag on becoming a politician, and its cost is inflating as the influx of big donations make it costlier to run a competitive campaign. As campaigns grow longer and more expensive, many politicians rely even more on special interest groups and upper-class individuals. 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 populace, 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.

Regulating campaign finance has proved to be an arduous task. The government has historically worked tirelessly to prohibit corporate donations towards federal elections, understanding the inherent bias this creates within our government. However, over the past decade and a half, the state of campaign finance regulation has changed drastically. In attempting to ban soft money, which is money spent indirectly supporting a candidate often on advertising and other campaign expenditures, the 2002 McCain-Feingold Act was enacted, but there were extensive unintended consequences. Through this law, governing attorneys would be able to ban any piece of media, book, or even internet speech that mentions a political candidate. When non-profit company Citizens United used money from for-profit companies to promote their political film *Hillary: The Movie*, it went to the supreme court, and in a five to four vote they determined that the laws put forth by the McCain-Feingold Act were unconstitutional, infringing on a company's right to free speech. This ultimately lifted the ban on independent expenditures, allowing for political action committees and non-profit organizations to take unlimited amounts of money and spend it on politics, so long as they did not collaborate directly with candidates. In the 2012 election neither candidate accepted any public financing at all. (Fuller, 2014) In attempting to regulate campaign finance, the government has only given corporations more freedom. Instead of making further attempts to regulate the private spending that goes toward elections, we should allow for and encourage an increased amount of public spending on elections.

Despite previous attempts to regulate the amount of money corporations spend on elections, the amount of money companies spend on politics has increased dramatically for the past several decades. The result of millions and millions of dollars going into our elections is that

policy is shaped by the special interest groups. One egregious example of this is the bias shown towards the arms manufacturing industry. Some studies have shown that public opinion may play no role at all in how foreign policy decisions are made. Anti-war sentiments have resurged countless times over history, yet the United States continues to provide funding and military aid to conflicts in many parts of the world. While this may be partly caused by a genuine desire to “help” the world, one factor in this decision-making is the desire to please weapons manufacturers, as these companies are some of the largest donors in our elections. Defense companies such as Northrop Grumman, Lockheed Martin, and Boeing, spend tremendous amounts of money donating to politics. Over the past three decades alone, Northrop Grumman’s political donations have increased from a mere 400,000 dollars in 1990 to a colossal four million in 2018, making them one of the top three PAC contributors. (Top PAC’s, 2018) War profiteers are more likely to encourage defense spending than the population at large. This type of undue influence is detrimental to our democracy as a whole.

The solution does not begin with federal regulation on campaign financing, as this was already attempted, 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 those small donations coming directly from his supporters. This is one of several examples that demonstrates the impact that individuals making small donations can have, giving a candidate who does not 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 spent donating to the politician of their choosing. (Castleton, 2018) This encourages all citizens to get involved with politics to greater extent, and also allows the people to support candidates that

establishment politics would typically avoid. If politicians did not rely on Super PAC's, large donations, and direct support from their respective party, then they would be less likely to make decisions serving the large corporations that typically fund their campaigns. While it is not certain exactly how this initiative has shaped election outcomes or policies in a direct way, it is a good first step in moving from privately funded elections to publicly funded ones. More cities and counties adopting these kinds of policies, will allow for more research on the effects of publicly financed elections. Places in Oregon should start doing the same, mimicking the Seattle initiative, allowing for more experimentation on how to effectively move towards publicly financed elections. The implementation of this policy will create more conversation locally and nationally about campaign finance, an issue that most Americans are already sympathetic to. Neighboring counties in Oregon will perhaps adopt similar policies, and the movement may expand to a state-wide level eventually.

Not only will public discourse occur surrounding the issue, but also the process will be refined as it is challenged legally, shaping it into a robust system of publicly financing elections. There may need to be changes to the voucher system, as there is no evidence that 100 dollars per person is the correct amount, or perhaps it will ultimately be upended and replaced with a better system. Regardless, campaign finance reform will not be one local law, but a populist movement. 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. (Cole, 2016) 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. In fact, there is little research or evidence that has shown a relationship between campaign finance and public policy. While there may be few examples of the current system showing bias towards a particular company or industry as a direct result of our campaign finance system, that does not mean that corporations do not have undue influence in our political system. There are many factors in how the government operates, making a direct causation difficult to prove. However, if just one of those factors is to please “Super-PAC” donors, that is a corruption of our political system, as their interests are prioritized over the people’s. Though it is difficult to test and prove, corporate campaign finance having any influence where the citizens have none is a distinct issue.

Another argument against campaign finance reform is the fact that the upper-class citizens cannot decide who wins and who does not. There is not a direct correlation between the most well-funded campaign and the most successful campaign. 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. It also fails to consider the barrier to entry that the current system creates for politicians, where the large corporations become gatekeepers on who is able to have a well-funded election.

The invisible hand of the market has gotten a hold on our democracy, and its grip only grows tighter. Acting in accordance with the interests of large corporations plays into how our government operates, because these corporations are the ones financing political campaigns with millions and millions of dollars. 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 groups on government, as their money is no longer what politicians rely on. Our democracy can be fixed, it simply requires patience and coordination.

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