

Amitai Etzioni

The American Slippage toward Plutocracy

The American political system is moving ever further away from the ideal of one person, one vote to a political system based on one dollar, one vote. Votes are rarely directly purchased with cash on the barrel. However, the outcome of elections is determined more than ever by the amount of money that a candidate can raise. Funds are used to conduct studies of the emotions and prejudices of the voters; to hire consultants to spin messages that appeal to these feelings; and to create massive television advertisements that carry these spinned messages to the electorate.

True, those with the largest purses and deepest pockets do not always win, but frequently they have a decisive advantage over their opponents. Moreover, once in office, legislators both in Congress and in many state assemblies heed mainly those who have made and are expected to make campaign contributions. In some cases these are individuals (George Soros just made a contribution exceeding fifteen-million dollars and promised to give more), but often these are corporations and associations, especially large groupings of special interests. Among the major donors are the real estate lobby, banks, numerous industrial groups, labor unions, and the National Rifle Association.

Most of these funds do not flow into the personal pockets of legislators to enrich their way of life, but rather they are dedicated to their election or reelection. The costs of being elected are so high in many Congressional districts that members of Congress, especially in the House, spend a good part of their time not legislating or visiting with their constituents, but soliciting funds, including from out-of-state interest groups (or sometimes even out-of-country groups).

ANSWERING THE APOLOGISTS

Apologists for this thoroughly undemocratic system argue that campaign contributions do not buy legislation, but only “access.” They claim that legislators will indeed listen to those who make contributions to their campaigns, but do no more than that. But in a democracy, access should be based on how many voters you have lined up, the potency of your case, and service done for your country — not the size of your bank account. And access leads to influence. Corporations, unions, banks, and the real estate industry would have to be both stupid beyond belief and in violation of fiduciary duties to their shareholders or members if they rained millions on members of Congress without any expected payoff.

Others point out that lobbying is a constitutionally protected activity, meaning that citizens have a right to petition their elected officials about whatever specific causes or interests concern them — whether or not such issues are in the general “public” interest. A leading political scientist, James Q. Wilson, recently wrote an opinion article titled “Pork is Kosher Under Our Constitution.” Well, not in my book. It is fully democratic for voters to lobby their elected officials — by writing them, sending petitions, buttonholing them, and bending their ear. But gaining influence by paying cash on the barrel is a form of lobbying that the Constitution hardly favors.

Even if Wilson’s premise were true, this would mean that those who can afford to make large donations would be much more likely than less-endowed people and groups to be able to sway those who

are supposed to enact laws in the public interest. However, detailed analysis of legislation on both the national and the state levels shows that often the laws that are enacted follow closely the wishes of those with deep pockets and all too often contain direct payoffs to them. (See for instance *The Corruption of American Politics* by Elizabeth Drew, *Honest Graft: Big Money and the American Political Process* by Brooks Jackson, and *Capital Corruption* by Amitai Etzioni.) Much of this payoff is not in the public eye because it is buried in the small print of acts that run into hundreds of pages riddled with tax exemptions, subsidies, loans at below-market interest rates, zoning exceptions, and many other kinds of favors for those who made campaign donations.

Another defense of the slippage toward plutocracy is that the amount of money a person can raise is a measure of how much public support he or she has, which is inherently democratic. If this is true, it makes more sense to ask people to throw dollar bills into ballot boxes instead of, well, ballots. The fact is that those who are richer can make much larger contributions than those who are poor. Welfare mothers are no match to bankers. Much has been made recently of the wonderful spectacle of Howard Dean

being able to raise small amounts of money from a large number of people. However, what is disregarded in this celebration of money is that these donations are in addition to those which he gets from groups and individuals who are among the most powerful. A system in which one could give *only* small donations would still favor those with greater

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means, but it would be vastly more democratic than the current system.

Defenders of the current system hold that individuals are limited in the amounts of funds that they can donate. The current limit is \$2,000 per individual per election, to their candidate of choice (primary and general elections could be considered as two elections). Each person can also donate \$5,000 for each calendar year to a PAC or state party com-

mittee and \$20,000 to their favorite national party. The total, though, cannot exceed \$25,000. Thus a family of four (assuming that the children are of age) can donate \$100,000 or more (if donations are spread over two years), an amount most families cannot possibly donate, leaving much of the field to the well-off. Moreover, many rich donors “bundle” — they get their relatives and friends to write checks and then use them to ensure that their own particular needs are addressed. Finally, the super-rich, such as John Kerry and Michael Bloomberg, can use as much of their own billions as their little hearts desire. Most importantly, despite various reforms, there is in effect no limit to the amount of money that corporations and other interest groups can put into an election campaign one way or another.

Whatever limits have been set by law on campaign contributions — and these change constantly as they are challenged in courts by advocates of legalized bribery — are often not enforced. The Federal Election Commission, which is supposed to be the watch dog of clean elections, has often been compared to a lap dog. It was set up to be a sop to reformers, but its design makes it prone to deadlock. This is because it is governed by three Democrats and three Republicans, and Congress limited its authority and accorded it a tiny budget.

PUBLIC INDIFFERENCE


Unfortunately, it is very difficult to get the public excited about the ways that monies corrupt the system. Although public-opinion polls show that more than half of Americans are in favor of campaign-finance reform, the public is much more interested in substantive issues such as health care and education and the war than in what is considered a procedural issue — the way elections and legislation are conducted. Moreover, told that public financing of election amounts to socialism, voters tend to shy away from it. Indeed, one of the least-addressed issues in the presidential primaries, at least so far, is the important question: How are we going to finance politics? As I see it, drawing on my year as a senior adviser to the Carter White House, there is no domestic issue more important. The reason is that most other public actions are undermined by the fact that decisions, all too often, are not made on the basis of public interests or inherent merit, but rather they are governed by special interests. Fix the “procedures” involved and get much substantive relief on many fronts. Indeed, as I see it, truly encompassing financing reform is as close to magic ever as one can come in public life.

Apologists for the existing system argue that whatever reforms are made will merely end up with

a flood of private monies looking for some other ways to flow into public hands. They should look at Great Britain. Parliamentary-election costs there are much lower because campaigns basically are limited to a few weeks. Each candidate is allowed to spend a small fixed amount (it is determined by a complex formula, but it averages a puny four figures, compared with the millions spent by most American candidates vying for Washington jobs). If a candidate spends more, the election results are invalidated. Candidates can mail one leaflet to each household free of charge, and the parties get free but rationed television time.

Many Americans abhor the idea of the government fully covering the costs of campaigns, and it has been labeled a “taxpayer-financed government takeover of campaigns.” The fact is, though, if clean elections could stop even a few of the laws that favor lobbies over public needs, then paying for campaigns from the public till would be a tremendous bargain. Thus, if we could kill some of the incredibly costly weapon systems that neither the Pentagon nor outside military experts favor, we would already be able to pay the costs of the next presidential and congressional elections.

Historically such major corruptions of a polity as we now face have not been corrected unless they have been made the core of a major social political movement. The best American example of such a major cleanup was the progressive movement, which took off some hundred years ago and is overdue for a second coming. Regrettably, the small groups interested in reform of the American polity, the biggest of which is Common Cause, have focused so far on drafting and marking up legislation. Without broad-based mobilization of those who are often locked out of the system by those with large oodles of money, reform, I hate to report, will not take place.



Amitai Etzioni is a University Professor at The George Washington University, and his most recent book is *My Brother's Keeper: A Memoir and a Message* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003). Scheduled for release in April is *From Empire to Community: A New Approach to International Relations* (Paulgrave, 2004).