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American Democracy Is Drowning in Money

by Celestine Bohlen,

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The tide of money swelling around the American political system continues to rise. In 2016, candidates running for federal office spent a record \$6.4 billion on their campaigns, while lobbyists spent \$3.15 billion to influence the government in Washington. Both sums are twice that of 2000 levels.

So what does all that money buy? No one seriously thinks that the quality of American representative democracy has doubled in value. Has it instead become doubly corrupt?

The United States has long maintained a freer approach to political financing than other Western democracies, in part because the country is big, campaigns are long and political advertising on television is essential and expensive. In many European countries, strict limits are placed on campaign spending or contributions, campaigns are kept short and paid political advertising on television is restricted or outright banned.

Since the Supreme Court's landmark 2010 ruling in the Citizens United case¹, campaign spending in the United States has become even more unrestricted. Today, commentators in Europe often describe the American way as "legalized corruption." In the United States, veterans of campaign finance reform despair at the ground lost since the 1970s, when the Watergate scandal ushered in a series of controls on campaign contributions.

The flood of money unleashed by the Citizens United decision has swept away the effectiveness of those controls, according to Fred Wertheimer, president of Democracy 21, a nonprofit organization dedicated to campaign reform. He dismissed as "illusory" the argument that contributions from supposedly independent groups

¹ Citizen's United is a Supreme Court ruling that political spending is protected by the First Amendment.

known as “super PACs” don’t corrupt the political process because they don’t work directly in concert with the campaigns they support.

“The bottom line is we have very serious problems with the functioning of our democracy caused by the unrestrained flow of influence-seeking money into the elections,” Mr. Wertheimer said.

But is it corruption? Do the gigantic sums doled out to campaigns — and later lavished on elected representatives as they are lobbied for their votes — amount to attempts to buy political power? Or is it, as the Supreme Court agreed in the Citizens United case, an exercise in constitutionally protected free speech?

Transparency International, the Berlin-based anti-corruption group, defines corruption as the “abuse of entrusted power for private gain.” In light of that, perhaps the American system isn’t so crooked after all. In fact, the United States performed well on Transparency International’s 176-country Corruption Perceptions Index from last year, ranking 18th, behind Denmark (1st) and Germany (10th), but ahead of France (23rd) and Russia (131st).

While the United States is fairly strict in cracking down on practices such as bribery and kickbacks, Mr. Wertheimer said, the American system has opened the door to a whole other kind of corruption.

“The corruption in the U.S. does not stem from officeholders putting money in their pocket,” he said. “This is systemic corruption of the process itself. When you are dealing with billions and billions of dollars, much of that focused on buying influence, it overwhelms the system, and it is much harder to defend against and maintain representation for ordinary Americans.”

Still, tolerance of quid pro quo transactions, which is more common in some other countries, is even worse than a political system awash in cash, according to Yascha Mounk, a lecturer on political theory at Harvard University. In his view, the former discourages economic investment, skews attitudes toward local government and corrodes faith in the justice system.

But he agrees that the vast sums spent on political campaigns in the United States are amplifying the sense among ordinary Americans that they’re being marginalized, politically and economically. The notion that “all politicians are corrupt” is an old one, and present in other democracies, Mr. Mounk said. But the idea that the rich are

getting richer while everyone else falls behind is becoming more prevalent in the United States.

This perception is borne out by research from Martin Gilens, a politics professor at Princeton University, which shows that American economic policies over the last 40 years “strongly reflect the preferences of the most affluent, but bear virtually no relationship to the preferences of poor or middle-income Americans.”

“Some argue that there is no causal relation, but as numerous former congressmen have testified, that is not the case,” Mr. Wertheimer said. “Huge amounts of money are not being given for charitable purposes, but to obtain benefits.”

The American system’s addiction to money has other noxious side effects. According to Reuters, members of Congress can spend as much time fund-raising as legislating — up to five hours a day — during tough campaigns.

Of course, it takes more than money to win elections. In both the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections, the candidates who spent the most money lost. And for every candidate who loses, millions, even billions, of dollars in contributions are spent for naught.

Nor are all contributions potentially venal; they come in all forms — in support of causes and issues, as well as corporate interests and industrial lobbies.

Too sharp a focus on money also overlooks the other ways politicians can be influenced. “There are indirect ways of buying favor which work in more subtle ways,” Mr. Mounk said. “You are influenced by the people around you — who you spend time with, who you have dinner with.”

Each culture has its own system of political influence or, some might say, corruption. Throwing around money is the American way. In Russia, the Kremlin doles out business to its favorite oligarchs, who in turn are in thrall to their political masters, a system that Mr. Mounk says is the most pernicious of all.

In France, where paid political advertising on television is prohibited, campaign spending and contributions are limited, and public campaign funding is available, voters this year punished a presidential candidate who had placed his wife in a no-show job on the public payroll, a questionable but not uncommon practice among France’s political elite.

In the United States, however, the immense sums of money swirling around politics and the proliferation of super PACs have yet to stir protests from voters, and efforts to fix campaign-spending laws have stalled in Congress. But that doesn't mean that the threat to a healthy democratic system isn't real, Mr. Wertheimer said.

“The amounts are unprecedented and provide an extraordinary advantage to the very rich,” he said. “When you are dealing with huge amounts of money — and when there are no laws to contain them — they overwhelm the process in a way that small sums can't.”

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