Money Talks

An Essay on the Pervasiveness of Money in the American Political System

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Abstract

One of the largest points of debate within the political community stems from the increasing ties between American politics and money. Both ideologically and practically, money is politics causes a corrosive effect that detracts from America’s citizenry’s and supposed political leaders’ abilities to promote positive discourse and debate over the issues that the nation faces.

Ideologically, because of the illusionary nature of money, political ideas become easily sabotaged by sheer disbelief in funding rather than at poor implementation, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy to fail. Practically, money’s ability to control media and dominate campaign success forces American government into a situation where the biggest wallet has the biggest voice, fundamentally destroying the merits of a democratic society.
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American government and politics are suffering from an epidemic, akin to a (nearly) incurable anti-biotic resistant super virus. No, it is not the plague of firebrand tea party candidates nor the sickness of irresponsible hippie liberals. Rather, this issue spreads farther than partisan bias and, sadly, right into American wallets. In recent history, one of the largest points of debate within the political community is the predominant correlation between money and power within American government. At the heart of this discourse is the question: How does money influence national discourse and the national agenda? It seems that the prevalence of money within the political process (a citizen’s own self-interest in the economy, a large corporation lobbying, a politician seeking private donors) has caused a disastrous rift in America’s ability to not only communicate the truth, but also to open itself up to new opportunities to learn, share, and cooperate on the political level. Universal, non-economic issues that deal with the tough questions Americans have to answer are significantly influenced by the money of sponsors and larger organizations rather than the ideas of the citizenry. Most jarring, however, is the predominance of money within the campaign process, leading to a society where the biggest wallet has the biggest voice and crowds out the fundamental democratic process. Thus, America is faced with an uninformed society that is polarized and unable to engage in positive discourse. At the root of this inability comes the pervasiveness of money within our democratic system. One can isolate the corrosive influence of money in politics in two ways. First, one can analyze how the current economic system ideologically enables these practices to happen. Second, one can view practical, visible scenarios in which policy makers and large (often business-oriented) organizations are driven by money, leading to real-life scenarios where money speaks more than people.
The most sweeping view of how money influences our political agenda and discourse is ideologically. In the modern global society, every policy is evaluated on a basis of self-interest, a logical extension of the capitalist system. As Jonathan Kirshner, professor at Cornell University, put it, “The management of money is always and everywhere political: for every policy choice, there is an alternative that some actors would prefer.” (CITE) Essentially, how our policymakers determine laws are simply an extension of market values, and every policy choice, as a result of the relation policy-making has to the economic system, will have a winner/loser scenario. Kirshner isolates five statements about money (“Money is everything. Money is nothing. Money is what you think it is. Money is power. Money is politics”) that support that the world’s current ideological and systemic infrastructure surrounding policy is fomenting the pervasiveness of money, rather than fighting against it. The first two claims, that money is nothing and everything, represent a fundamental paradox of the global system. The success and failure of a state depends on its ability to fall on the right side of market values and act within the paradigm of the capitalist system. However, money itself has no intrinsic value, it is a human creation used to project value of any present transaction to a value in the future. This creates the illusionary reality that the best policy options follow market forces. However, this system is easily manipulated, as told by Kirshner’s next claim that “money is what you think it is.”

“Money is What You Think it is. Another unique aspect of money is that it has value solely because other people think it is valuable. Thus assessing expectations about the future value of money depends on guessing other people’s assessments about the future value of money. This leads to some interesting paradoxes. Even if all the passengers on an otherwise sound plane don’t think it will take off, it will. But if just enough of the holders
of a given currency don’t think an otherwise sound monetary reform makes sense, it won’t fly. Ideas about money management, then, have a distinct and profound influence in the world of money, regardless of whether or not those ideas are right or wrong. (Kirshner cite).

This interesting, almost psychological phenomenon (human investors’ thoughts literally controlling the success of any market) is especially relevant to today’s influence of money within the political realm. Ideologically, the American system is tied so close to money that legitimate policies that are passed maybe deliberately influenced by the sheer thought of a large monetary body related to the policy. For example, if the government were to pass a law developing an alternative energy initiative through funding from the private sector (whether through taxes or company involvement), the success of the policy can be easily derailed by, say, big oil corporations that simply don’t agree with the legislation and then refuse to “believe” or invest in the initiative. An example of Kirshner’s analysis coming into fruition recently would be the implementation of the Affordable Care Act in the past few months. In theory, Obamacare needs to full compliance of nearly every aspect to be successful in order for the actual healthcare system to work (such as the citizens willing to sign up for the exchange, the full reception of tax money from those with high income, and the compliance of states to expand Medicaid).

However, many opponents of Obamacare were also part of the system to make it work (like the state of Louisiana, a deep-red state closely related to high-income earners). Thus, during the legislative process many of these people and states used their ability to “not believe” in the bill to alter the bill; these acts of rejection (in this case, the failure to expand Medicaid by red states like Louisiana) of the bill overall diminished the effectiveness and morphed the original intent of the act.
This ideological part of America’s political infrastructure creates a large dependency on the money behind the ideas, rather than promoting the merits of the ideas themselves; the situation is backwards: ideas go where money goes rather than money going to where ideas go. More effort is taken to court monetary benefactors rather than the support ideals and perspectives, as economic support is more indicative of an initiative’s success than the support of the ideas presented by congressmen or women. This prevents meaningful change from occurring in the public or private sectors; one is dominated by big money that usually supports anti-progressive, close-minded, traditionalist agendas and the other has no larger incentive to innovate or expand (leaving only a handful of organizations that are driven innately, like Google). The current ideological system intrinsically supports this behavior by lawmakers, organizations and individuals and disrupts the introduction, passage, and implementation of beneficial legislation.

Money also pervades the political realm practically. Although our system may not be established in the best way to rid money from politics, that does not mean steps cannot be taken to do so. However, in reality money is closely related to national discourse and the system is leading towards a nation where an elite few control the political dialogue. The first major problem one can view in the United States is how a citizen’s perspective in legislative affairs is closely tied to the media, which is tied to money. Whether indirectly through large media conglomerates like Comcast (the largest telecommunications lobbying group as well as a business powerhouse), or directly through news organizations with a well-known partisan bias (like Fox News and MSNBC), the organizations behind the media will influence the political message of the media. In fact, one of the most prominent aspects to mass media in today’s age is its ability to set the agenda. Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, professors at the
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, write that there is a strong correlation to what public discourse emerges as and what topics are discussed in mass media. McCombs indicates that “…the evidence in this study that voters tend to share the media’s composite definition of what is important strongly suggests an agenda-setting function of the mass media.” (p. 184) At the systemic level, media enables society to have a sense of what is “important” in the political world, even those citizens that are less politically active. As an extension, the media controls what is “important” by choosing what they broadcast or what spin they use to cover a story, a large portion of which could be determined by a few individuals.

However, by far the most frightening example of money corroding political discourse and agenda stems from the enormous money-sinks that are national elections. First and foremost, there is a large correlation between a politician’s success (defined by his or her ability to win an election and remain in office, rather than his or her ability to make a positive influence on a nation) and the amount of money spent on his or her campaign. Bob Biersack (2012) from the Center for Responsive Politics reported that there from 2000 to 2010, in all 2,438 House races, 2,264 (93%) of the races were won by the biggest spender. Although, of course, the remaining 7% of wins represent the other influences besides fundraising and campaign spending, there is not another factor with this large a correlation to campaign winnings. Likewise, Thomas Mann and Anthony Corrado from the Brookings Institute analyzed these spending trends during the 2000 election cycle.

During the 2000 election cycle, individuals contributed $822 million to federal candidates, $558 million to PACs, and $889 million to political parties ($712 million in hard dollars, $177 million in soft). The total, $2.3 billion, does not include non-federal contributions to groups or state and local parties for voter mobilization programs or issue
advocacy designed to influence federal elections. (Corrado p. 5)

This results in two major problems. First, national candidates are forced, if not encouraged, to appeal to those individual contributors that possess a large sum of money. Corporations or wealthy people (like Sheldon Adelson and the Koch Brothers) that have a stake in national politics are treated as more important than the voices of the people that a congress-person should represent because of the enormous influence their financial supports gives. From the viewpoint of a reasonably self-interested politician, it becomes exceedingly risky to spend time visiting parts of one’s constituency when that time and money could go into courting a larger donor who will have a grander influence on the politician’s success. The second major conflict is imminent corruption. Ideologically, a donor contributing to a campaign fund (in controlled amounts) represents a fundamental part of spreading a political-hopeful’s message. However, American society is moving closer to unregulated, uncontrolled donations that will (if they do not already) corrupt the pure democratic system. In 1997, prior to the *Citizens United v. FEC* case that exploded campaign spending, Owen M. Fiss studied the enormity of money within the presidential campaign, citing that “…sums far exceeding the [spending] limits were spent on their [candidates] behalf by the political parties and by other interested, but nominally independent, individuals and organizations…” (p. 2471). Essentially, even before the Supreme Court decision to grant unlimited private contributions, there was abuse in the system that encouraged candidates to try to grab independent expenditures and funding.

The impacts that this obscenely high amount of campaign spending have are tremendous. With the recent *McCutcheon v. FEC* decision allowing a private donor to donate to an unlimited number of candidates, the ability for politicians to search for private donors (and vice versa) is augmented. Suddenly, organizations like Koch Industries (the second largest private company in
the nation) that could benefit from certain political agendas and policy decisions can use its
monetary power to influence not only who runs, but also court politicians seeking monetary
backing (just look at the recent trips GOP members took to Las Vegas to gain financial backing
from multi-millionaire Sheldon Adelson last week). Perhaps the worst part of the scenario is that
now the average citizen’s voice becomes less important than another. Suddenly, a majority
opinion represented by the normal citizenry is diminished because of the electoral significance of
the wealthy elite. The biggest wallet will have the most prominent voice and the self-interest of
the few will become the interest of the state.

**Conclusion**

American politics is heading down a dangerous path. Money pervades nearly every aspect of
rational policy making and forces politicians into a win/lose scenario for every piece of
legislation. Furthermore, money is so closely related to current perceptions of political success
that it is more imperative that politicians pander to the elite few than listen and discuss with the
average citizen. Both the agenda-setting media and campaigns are heavily influenced by a select
few wealthy, politically active donors that control the direction of national discourse. Instead,
national discourse and agenda setting should be a direct extension of the combined voices of the
citizenry. Not only does the influence of money breed a society where politicians are more
concerned with winning elections than changing laws, but it also creates a traditionalist society
that has to struggle against the government to institute change. It is high time that American
government becomes an institution that is proactive towards the growth of universal discourse,
rather than perpetuate a society that caters to a select few.
References


