

GETTING A GRASP ON MONEY IN POLITICS

by Bill Woods for StreetVibes, July 29, 2016

How do we deal with such an overwhelming problem? It is so enormous that it defies us to get a handle on it. "Big money" has become so dominant in our political process that many people now throw up their hands in despair and say this is a reality that cannot be changed. Like the myth in which Sisyphus is doomed to unsuccessfully roll rocks up the hill, reformers see their reforms fail due to huge legal and political obstacles.

The facts are daunting. The press reports Hillary Clinton raised \$28-million in May, and she is expected to spend a billion on her campaign for President. During the same month, billionaire Donald Trump took in \$3.1-million, and pundits talked about his campaign's money shortage. An earlier article by The New York Times reported that one hundred and fifty families in the U.S. had donated half of the cash for the presidential primary contests.

Focusing on the Koch brothers alone, they have pledged to spend \$700-\$900 million on 2016 political races. Since they are not Trump backers, their millions will flow to Congressional candidates who support their anti-regulation and anti-tax agenda. Ohio is a good example. In a close race between incumbent Senator Rob Portman and former Governor Ted Strickland, the Kochs and their allies have already donated approximately \$30- million to Portman's campaign.

With giant legal obstacles such as Citizens United and the reality that 2016 will be the most expensive election ever, are political reforms hopeless? If we accept "yes" as the answer to that question, then we have to accept the replacement of democracy with plutocracy. Granting then the up hill struggle for reform, reformers must continue to promote their proposals

There also seem to be some signs of hope. Beyond the damage "big money" has done to the political process itself, people are beginning to see the connections between politics and economic and social problems. No one has better documented the interrelationship of trends such as corporate campaign donations and current anti-regulation and tax policies than former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich. In his book, "Capitalism For All," Reich describes the growing economic inequality in this country as a direct result of corporate power in Washington, D.C. and in many state capitals. That is why he became the Chair of Common Cause and a champion of campaign reform.

Ironically, Donald Trump sensed the public's distaste for the dependency of candidates on large donors. As a billionaire, he said he wouldn't have this need. However, now that he is the Republican nominee for President, he just endorsed a new super PAC, "Rebuilding America Now," dedicated to his election.

On the other side of the political equation, Senator Bernie Sanders made political reform an integral part of his

grassroots agenda, and he criticized Hillary Clinton for her Wall Street ties and for accepting million dollar speaking fees from Goldman Sachs. By the end of the primaries, both Sanders and Clinton were on record in favor of repealing Citizens United. Nevertheless, Clinton is raising a ton of money, and the super PAC supporting her, "Priorities USA Action," has raised nearly \$100-million in recent months.

What specifically can reformers do in the months ahead? Obviously, the Presidential and Congressional campaigns offer an ideal backdrop for educating Americans about the need to restrict the damaging impact of "big money" on representative democracy. Beyond portraying money's unhealthy influence on campaigns and public life, reformers must show what can effectively be done to make things better.

There is no silver bullet for renewing democracy. Addressing the impacts of Citizens United, represents the biggest challenge. The easiest solution would be a reversal of this 2010 Supreme Court decision by a new Court majority. Since it was a divisive five to four decision, it could be successfully challenged if one or two new appointments changed the direction of the Court. In fact, the appointment of new Justices has already become an issue in the Presidential race.

Without a reversal by the Supreme Court, Congress can pass legislation such as requiring full disclosure of individual and corporate donors to super PACs. Beyond

such limited improvements, however, a Constitutional Amendment will be needed to eliminate Citizens United. Groups such as "Move To Amend" are already organized to do just that, but amending the Constitution is a Herculean undertaking that will require diverse citizens and civic groups to effectively work together for years.

One reform that has been effective in stunting the importance of seeking large donations is the public financing of campaigns. Variations of public financing exists in certain cities, Arizona, and several New England states, and it has helped elect local and state public officials who could not have won without public support. In Cincinnati, voters passed a campaign reform Charter Amendment in 2001 that included public financing, but big local donors such as Carl Lindner helped bankroll a counter Amendment in 2002 that eliminated that section of the reform law.

Because of an earlier Supreme Court decision, Buckley versus Valeo, public financing must be voluntary for candidates, and if candidates choose not to receive it, no limit can be set in terms of how much they spend on their campaigns. Nevertheless, It exists as a reform that helps level the playing field for candidates who don't have or don't want support from Fat Cat donors.

Another longstanding reform that exists at the federal, state, and local levels establishes contribution limits for individuals and organizations donating to candidates' campaigns. Although such limits deserve to be

maintained, the Supreme Court's unleashing of basically uncontrolled super PACs has greatly limited the effectiveness of this restriction.

Finally, a variety of disclosure laws at all levels allows us to see who is giving the huge campaign donations. New disclosure laws are needed to shed light on the hidden money going into the private groups unleashed by Citizens United.

Besides using 2016 as an education year focused on the need for campaign reform, this time should be utilized in expanding the number of civic, religious, social service, and grassroots groups that are concerned about money in politics, voting rights, and ending gerrymandering. Until we build huge coalitions of diverse citizens, we will fall further behind in the battle to renew democracy?