

## Common Cause Celebrates Its 50th Birthday As Political Reformers Face A Critical Uphill Battle June 29,2021

(by Bill Woods for StreetVibes)

Common Cause celebrated its 50th year in operation on June 10th. This national citizen reform organization was founded by John Gardner in 1971 during the first term of the Nixon Administration. Founded during the turbulent time of Vietnam protest, urban unrest, and the counter culture versus Main Street U.S.A, the organization sought to renew the health of democracy by empowering citizens to get involved in government and politics. Although Gardner saw the need for reform in 1971, groups such as Common Cause are even more necessary today.

Politics in this country was quite different fifty years ago. In Washington, D.C., for instance, the House of Representatives and the Senate were a lot less polarized than today. Both the Republican and Democratic Parties included conservative, liberal, and moderate members.

Most members of Congress from the South were still Democrats who tended to side with conservative Republican members from the Midwest and West. Meanwhile, there were a number of liberal and moderate Democrats and Republicans elected from eastern, Midwestern, and western states. This diversity within the two parties meant that a lot of compromising had to take place within the parties themselves. This situation also meant that informal coalitions were formed between Republicans and Democrats in order to pass various bills in the House and Senate.

This party diversity led to a lot of bipartisan negotiations in order to get laws passed. The landmark Civil Rights legislation enacted during the Johnson Administration could not have taken place without these informal coalitions of Republicans and Democrats. Liberal Republican and Democratic members of Congress provided the foundation of support for these bills, while enough moderates from both parties were finally convinced to pass the legislation. Meanwhile, President Johnson was able to convince prominent Southern Democrats not to attempt to block these Bills by using the filibuster.

The Vietnam War existed as the most controversial policy at the time Common Cause was founded, but opponents and proponents of this conflict could be found in both parties. Senators Eugene McCarthy and George McGovern were leading Democratic opponents, but they were matched by Senators Mark Hatfield and Charles Percy, and Congressmen Charles Whalen from the Republican side of the aisle.

When compared to the current makeup of the two parties and how they function in determining legislation, the diversity of the 1960s and 1970s appears much healthier for a functioning government and for representative democracy in general. Neither party today possesses much ideological diversity, and Congressional leaders like Mitch McConnell set a higher priority for building their Party's power than working toward policies that will benefit "we the people." In fact, instead of working toward any compromise legislation with the Democrats during the Obama years, McConnell's stated aim was to block any Bills supported by that Administration. With Joe Biden now in the White House, the Kentucky Senator has again publicly announced that same goal. Although numerous economic and social problems need public attention and creative

legislation, this kind of intransigence will make such action difficult if not impossible.

Another concern of Common Cause at the time of its founding was the growing influence of money in the political and governmental process. During the 1970s, contributions to campaigns from big donors were beginning to warp the normal course of campaigns. This compulsive need of candidates for big donations to pay for TV advertising distracted them from focusing on the issues confronting their average constituents. Candidates for Congress spent a lot of time dialing for dollars.

During this first round when members from Common Cause and other citizen groups championing campaign finance reforms, some progress was achieved. Many states and cities adopted contribution limits and requirements for candidates to publicly disclose campaign donations. Some went even further and enacted legislation that provided for the public financing of campaigns.

Even in this earlier period, the Supreme Court erected legal barriers that blunted effective reform. In the Buckley versus Valeo decision of 1976, the Court ruled against a federal reform law that established a limit on how much a candidate for a Congress could spend. The Court equated spending money on a campaign to freedom of speech, and ruled that governments could not put in place such a limit. Although the Court upheld establishing contribution limits, it also held that candidates could spend as much of their own money as they wanted on their campaigns.

Today the influence of "big money" has grown even greater in our political process. Once again the Supreme Court has been a major factor in increasing the power of corporate campaign donors. The Citizen United Case of 2010 opened up a whole new world of political spending that has steadily mounted since the Court made its ruling. Adding to the earlier ruling that equates campaign spending to freedom of speech, Citizens United gave "personhood" to corporations and said that these entities could not be denied the right to spend money in support of issues or candidates.

The Citizens United Case has weakened earlier reforms like contribution limits and the public financing of campaigns. For instance, if it declares that it has no official ties with a candidate's campaign organization, a corporate or union PAC can launch a campaign for a candidate with no concern for contribution limits or other restrictions. Such separate spending, if large enough, can make contribution limits and public financing irrelevant.

This kind of Super PAC activity has become common since 2010, and it has led to a lot of disillusionment about whether the political system really serves "we the people" anymore. Reformers continue to wrestle with finding the appropriate reforms and strategies for dealing with the "big money" factor. The most difficult but comprehensive approach is working for an Amendment to the Constitution that would overturn the Citizens United decision.

Thus, after fifty years of operation, Common Cause currently exists in a public environment that is even more in need of a group dedicated to organizing citizens to reform politics and government. In a recent email to members, it's current President Karen Hobert Flynn called for "persistence" in what she described as "a once in a generation fight to save democracy."

Besides the warping impact of "big money," the multi-state voter suppression campaign must be taken on. With one of the two major Parties working to undermine public confidence in our election process, Common Cause seeks to renew representative democracy and restore that public confidence.

While Common Cause state chapters work to defeat voter suppression legislation such as House Bill 294 in Ohio, Flynn and her Washington, D.C. staff have dedicated the summer to mounting an effective citizen campaign to convincing the U.S Senate to pass both the For the People Act and the Voting Rights Act. When announcing this campaign, Flynn described how this legislation directly takes on voter suppression, gerrymandering, and "big money," while it strengthens transparency. If enacted, these Bills would prevent much of the state activity to hamper people from voting, while the For the People Act also includes public financing for Congressional elections. The goal is to keep the pressure on both the Senate and the Biden Administration until these Bills are passed into law and signed by the President. For further information about this campaign go to [Common Cause.org](https://CommonCause.org).