

Big-Money Takeover of America

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Not only is income and wealth in America more concentrated in fewer hands than it's been in 80 years, but those hands are buying our democracy as never before - and they're doing it behind closed doors.

Hundreds of millions of secret dollars are pouring into congressional and state races in this election cycle. The Koch brothers (whose personal fortunes grew by \$5 billion last year) appear to be behind some of it, Karl Rove has rounded up other multi-millionaires to fund right-wing candidates, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce is funneling corporate dollars from around the world into congressional races, and Rupert Murdoch is evidently spending heavily.

No one knows for sure where this flood of money is coming from because it's all secret.

But you can safely assume its purpose is not to help America's stranded middle class, working class, and poor. It's to pad the nests of the rich, stop all reform, and deregulate big corporations and Wall Street - already more powerful than since the late 19th century when the lackeys of robber barons literally deposited sacks of cash on the desks of friendly legislators.

Credit the Supreme Court's grotesque decision in *Citizens United vs. the Federal Election Commission*, which opened the floodgates. (Even though 8 of 9 members of the Court also held disclosure laws constitutional, the decision invited the creation of shadowy "nonprofits" that don't have to reveal anything.)

According to FEC data, only 32 percent of groups paying for election ads are disclosing the names of their donors. By comparison, in the 2006 midterm, 97 percent disclosed; in 2008, almost half disclosed.

Last week, when the Senate considered a bill to force such disclosure, every single Republican voted against it - thereby revealing the GOP's true colors, and presumed benefactors. (To understand how far the GOP has come, nearly ten years ago campaign disclosure was supported by 48 of 54 Republican senators.)

Maybe the Disclose Bill can get passed in lame-duck session. Maybe the IRS will make sure Karl Rove's and other supposed nonprofits aren't sham political units. Maybe pigs will learn to fly.

In the meantime we face an election that marks an even sharper turn toward plutocratic capitalism than before - a government by and for the rich and big corporations - and away from democratic capitalism.

As income and wealth has moved to the top, so has political power. That's why, for example, it's been impossible to close the absurd tax loophole that allows hedge-fund and private-equity managers to treat much of their income as capital gains, subject to a 15 percent tax (even though they're earning tens or hundreds of millions a year, and the top 15 hedge-fund managers earned an average of \$1 billion last year). Why it proved impossible to fund expanded health care by limiting

the tax deductions of the very rich. Why it's so difficult even to extend George Bush's tax cuts for the bottom 98 percent of Americans without also extending them for the top 2 percent - even though the top won't spend the money and create jobs, but will blow a \$36 billion hole in the federal budget next year.

The good news is average Americans are beginning to understand that when the rich secretly flood our democracy with money, the rest of us drown. Wall Street executives and top CEOs get bailed out while under-water homeowners and jobless workers sink.

A Quinnipiac poll earlier this year found overwhelming support for a millionaire tax.

But what the public wants means nothing if our democracy is secretly corrupted by big money.

Right now we're headed for a perfect storm: An unprecedented concentration of income and wealth at the top, a record amount of secret money flooding our democracy, and a public in the aftershock of the Great Recession becoming increasingly angry and cynical about government. The three are obviously related.

We must act. We need a movement to take back our democracy. (If tea partiers were true to their principles, they'd join it.) As Martin Luther King once said, the greatest tragedy is "not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people."

What can you do?

1. Read Justice Steven's dissent in the Citizens United case, so you're fully informed about the majority's pernicious illogic.
2. Use every opportunity to speak out against this decision, and embarrass and condemn the right-wing Justices who supported it.
3. In this and subsequent elections, back candidates for congress and president who vow to put Justices on the Court who will reverse it.
4. Demand that the IRS enforce the law and pull the plug on Karl Rove and other sham nonprofits.
5. If you have a Republican senator, insist that he or she support the Disclose Act. If they won't, campaign against them.
6. Support public financing of elections.
7. Join an organization like Common Cause, that's committed to doing all this and getting big money out of politics. (Personal note: I'm so outraged at what's happening that I just became chairman of Common Cause.)
8. Send this post to your friends (including any tea partiers you may know).

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