

## **The United States of Plutocracy**

Paris, September 7, 2009. The United States has for practical purposes been a plutocracy for some years now. American national elections usually function more or less correctly, except that they have become all but completely dominated by money.

The contributors of money to Senate and Congressional campaigns are dominated by the source of that money, and the source of the money is the United States government, which directs it to them as a result of the contracts awarded to them by the congressmen and the senators whose election they support. The process is circular.

It would be cheaper for all concerned if business were directly to pay senators and congressmen and eliminate the middlemen, the parasites that live on the surplus money in this system, paid for their ability to persuade both sellers and buyers (so to speak) that they are providing a service by facilitating the bargain. Elections now cannot take place without them.

There would seem to be two steps by which this rot has taken hold. The first is change in the legislation originally concerned with the use by broadcasters of the airwaves, a public resource. In 1934 the Federal Communications Commission was established with authority over broadcasts. Being a politically balanced body, it decreed that the public service obligation of the broadcaster included the responsibility to provide balanced information. (The Fox News claim to be "fair and balanced" is a sneering reference to this, no doubt unintentional.)

This rule applied to commentary on the news and to coverage of elections and acceptance of political advertising. There had to be substantial balance.

This arrangement was destroyed by the Reagan administration, which removed the FCC's responsibility to enforce political "fairness" in radio and television network commentary and election coverage. The Republican-controlled Congress defeated efforts to reinstate it.

The change was challenged in 1976 by a congressional candidate who contended that he had been defeated by a candidate who spent on his campaign a sum enormously more than the plaintiff could spend. He contended that the Congress had imposed an unconstitutional money qualification upon election to federal office.

In one of the more notorious and deplorable decisions in the history of the Supreme Court, it ruled that all money spent on advertising in a political campaign is constitutionally protected free speech (Buckley v. Valeo, 1976).

Since then, the United States has been in a dizzying downward spin in the effective purchase of public office by candidates with the most wealthy supporters, usually business corporations. A perverse effect of the ruling, possibly unrecognized by the court, is that this indirectly required all candidates to adopt pro-business positions, or at least positions sufficiently inoffensive to business that they did not become the object of targeted campaigns to silence them.

On Wednesday September 9, the Supreme Court began hearing arguments on the legitimacy of any

restriction on direct electoral spending by business corporations.

Since 1908, business corporations have been prohibited from spending on federal elections. Unions have been banned from doing so since 1947. States have banned corporate campaign spending since the late 19th century. Today corporations and unions contribute indirectly through political action committees, limited in what can be contributed.

If corporations now were licensed to make direct payment from corporate funds to influence elections, the country would become a wholly-owned subsidiary of American business. The government would no longer be able to act disinterestedly. In the circumstances, there would appear to be no possibility that legislation to reverse the effects of such a ruling could succeed.

I do not know whether this is something the majority of citizens wish to see happen. Probably, in these difficult times, the majority do not even know that it is happening. They will discover it later.

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