

When politics become frozen

Thomas C. Fox | Oct. 12, 2010 NCR Today

It seems we've reached a new and sad moment in American politics. Big money is thoroughly corrupting the electoral system while fright over the state of the economy and an undifferentiated anger over the role of government has produced some of the most unusual candidates of recent memory.



Both major political parties are beholden to big money to win elections and to stay in office.

Politicians know to follow the money, and as money is sucked to the top of our financial system, concentrated there as never before, power gets concentrated there as well. Politicians must seek the attention of the few, rather than the many.

A situation that had become alarming has grown worse. According to a recent report in *The Washington Post*, interest groups are spending five times as much on the 2010 congressional elections [\$80 million] as they did on the last midterms [\$16 million], and they are more secretive than ever about where the money is coming from.

In the last midterm election, 90 percent of the money and donors' identities was disclosed. This year, that figure has fallen to less than half of the total, according to data analyzed by *The Washington Post*.

Some of the spending increase and lack of accountability is attributed to last year's Supreme Court ruling that overturned previous restraints on spending and opened the door to unlimited spending by corporations and other special-interest groups. Big money now has the unfettered freedom to shape American politics to its benefit. In other cases, the spending spike is being driven by the political climate and the fact that many interest groups are organized as nonprofits and don't have to divulge their financial backers.

The theoretical intention of democracy is one person, one vote. What we have today is more like one thousand dollars, one vote. As a result, the political process has been ripped out of the hands of ordinary people, especially at the state and national levels. The system is stuck. Neither major political party can operate outside well-defined, if not publicly stated, boundaries established by a conglomeration of special interests. Translate that to mean competing wealth interests from all sectors of the economy. And don't overlook the power of the lobbies that keep military spending at obscene levels.

It seemed a genuine revolt against the power of such interests was underway with the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States. But his election has done more to show the limits of power in the most powerful office on earth than it has demonstrated a consensus on moving sanely into the future.

Obama may be the most "democratic-minded" president we have experienced in many years, but he, too, seems to be hemmed in by military and economic forces he cannot control. His responses to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, his response to the unprecedented economic implosion brought on by the greed and manipulation of the wealthy relative few, and his laudable desire to bring greater fairness to our health care system have all been shaped more by big money than the will of the people.

And so we approach another set of state and national elections in which a large part of the political electorate, increasingly frustrated by this broken system, is in frenzy and wants to pretty much "throw the bastards out." That the baby will go out with the bathwater simply doesn't seem to matter. Revisionist (or quickly forgotten) history, undifferentiated anger and a civic fundamentalism that uses the Constitution as text are the tools of this new politics. Never mind that signs and comments make it embarrassingly clear that few have actually read, much less studied, the text that inspires so much fervor.

Our reports this week in our election political package reflect both the frenzy and the narrowness and manipulation of issues that seem to characterize these midterm elections. It's all so disappointing. At the same time, maybe it takes this mess to finally spawn true political reform. There was a time, seemingly not long ago, when our nation was a beacon of democracy, where even the most market-driven politician believed that government had a role in making sure the disparities in wealth, in access to care and opportunity, did not become too disproportionate. The best of our collective instincts still believe this to be true. We can only hope that the ageless tussle between government acting on behalf of power and wealth or for the common good, a tension as old as the republic, has not been tilted irretrievably in the direction of money.

Stories in this series

- [Emotions run high](#) [1], by Paul Moses
- [When politics become frozen](#) [2], by Thomas C. Fox
- Taking the midterm ground game to Virginia's neighborhoods, by Michael Sean Winters (*Posted Wednesday, Oct. 13*)
- Candidates talk God, country, jobs, by Joshua J. McElwee (*Posted Thursday, Oct. 14*)
- Beyond the days of mimeographed tracts, Book review by Joe Ferullo (*Posted Friday, Oct. 15*)

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