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Media need to do a better job of reporting political scandals

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Since Watergate in the 1970s, a certain media-driven script has unfolded that goes something like this: During a president's first term, the media, generally speaking, allow the new leader some breathing space. However, if re-elected, the script calls for a new version of Watergate and a focus on presidential scandals.

The media love scandals because of the drama and a simple black-and-white narrative: Someone messes up, and someone has to fall. This is all simple journalism, and it does not advance our democracy. Why? Because the media do not do their work. They rely on sensationalism and sound bites rather than substantive context to their reporting.

We are witnessing all this now with "Benghazi-gate," "AP-gate" and "IRS-gate." This lack of context was brilliantly brought to attention with respect to the IRS issue in a column in the business section of the *Los Angeles Times* by columnist Michael Hiltzik.

Hiltzik turns the table around and stresses that the real scandal is not what the IRS did but the proliferation of political groups, both on the right and the left, who use the vagueness concerning nontaxable "charities" allowed by the law to apply for this status, even though these groups have nothing to do with charity and everything to do with partisan politics. If approved, and many are, they add to the scandal by not only not paying taxes but by not revealing their donors.

This is scandalous and has been going for years, although the Supreme Court's 2010 ruling in the Citizens United case allowing unlimited spending by corporations and other special interests has only led to a significant expansion of applications by political groups, such as those organized by Karl Rove to receive nonprofit status as "social welfare" organizations in order to promote political candidates. They falsely

claim that they are on the same level as religious groups and educational ones. Clearly, such organizations, including the tea party ones and those organized by pro-Obama people, are not social welfare or charitable groups and should not be allowed to masquerade as such.

They get away with this because of a congressional-influenced vagueness in the description of what constitutes a 501(c)(4) entity. Taking advantage of this vagueness, many political groups, right and left, have received this status, even though the intent of the law is to largely promote charitable activities. I don't think contributing to an electoral group constitutes a charitable activity.

Hence, the real scandal is not that the IRS overstepped its regulatory powers but that it has limited such regulation and allowed too many noncharitable organizations to receive a nontaxable exemption and compounded this by allowing donors to such questionable groups to not reveal their identity. Such practices only diminish the concept of a free and open democracy. This is not right, and this is what needs to be fixed.

But what about the "scandal" that the IRS only targeted tea party-type groups? Hiltzik sets the record straight and reports what the rest of the media are not reporting: The tea party groups represented only one-third of those further scrutinized by the IRS, not in order to harass them, but to determine if they were legitimate charities.

Of course, many are not. But this means two-thirds were not tea party groups, so do the math. That means the press and irate politicians should be calling attention to these other groups the IRS "targeted" for special attention. Furthermore, all of these groups, both right and left, subject to further scrutiny all were given nontaxable status, though many certainly did not deserve it. Why isn't this being reported? Poor journalism and partisan politics. Hiltzik also underscores the hypocrisy of conservatives who say there is too much government regulation, but in this case, they want more regulation, meaning regulating the IRS to not do its job of screening applications for nontaxable status. You can't have it both ways.

I doubt the real truth of what is involved in this "IRS-gate" scandal will fully be reported to the American public, and we will be faced again with whether still another second-term president may be impeached. Give me a break.

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