

What to do about money in politics?

By Jim Nowlan

The U.S. Supreme Court is considering whether to eliminate most or all limits on money in politics. If the court lifts the already porous lid on campaign expenditures by megabucks players on the Right and Left, we may see confirmation that America is largely run by an oligarchy of wealth.

Is there anything we can or should do about it?

Campaigns for office have always needed four resources: people (to ring doorbells, for example), money, skill and time. In the days of political machines, the political parties provided the precinct door-knockers, the skill at running campaigns, and money; the candidate provided his valuable time.

Those days are long gone. Today the candidates are expected to do it all, to include raising \$1 million plus for congressional campaigns and millions for senate races.

I knew a candidate who wore a head-set while “dialing for dollars” from prospective donors, which she had to do much of each day to raise money for a congressional race.

Money has always played a big part in politics. In the late Roman Republic, leading politicians such as Crassus, Pompey and Julius Caesar all had vast wealth, which they used to curry favor with the hoi polloi through bread, circuses and personally-financed armies.

In contrast, one can only speculate that in the early Republic, the virtue of the best men rather than wealth dominated the selection of leadership.

George Washington was the wealthiest landowner in our colonies, and he treated his constituents to rum and vittles on election day to curry their favor. This common practice in early American politics was deplored by Ninian Edwards, an early 19th Century Illinois governor, who saw “treating” first hand in the Prairie State.

Edwards declared that the practice would ultimately become necessary to success and that politics would be confined to the rich, “for they alone will be able to meet the expenses of an election.”

This may have come to pass.

According to the Sunlight Foundation, the top 1 percent of the top 1 percent of all donors contributed at least \$1.62 billion in the 2012 election cycle, about 40 percent of all the money spent in the cycle, and this doesn’t included money that did not have to be disclosed.

No member elected to Congress won without money from these big-money givers, according to the foundation, and 84 percent of those elected received more from the big-money folks than from all their small (under \$200) donors.

At present, there are no limits on what an individual can contribute to advocacy groups in campaigns.

There are, however, limits on the amount that can be contributed to the candidates themselves, which is \$5,200 total for the primary and general elections. An individual is also limited to no more than an aggregate of \$123,000 in overall contributions to candidates and party committees.

In the case before the high court, the justices could overturn the aggregate limits, or go further and cast aside all limits on individual giving to candidates.

Either way, the role of big money would be expanded.

From my own experience at the state legislative level, and in managing U.S. Senate and presidential campaigns years ago, I saw that money in big dollops from interest groups and big individual donors provided them easy access to the candidates.

This personal access, which regular citizens do not have, is critical to generating influence with the candidates.

What to do, if anything?

Public financing of presidential campaigns hasn't worked. President Obama declined public financing, as he could raise so much more than would have been provided by public financing. In the future, no serious presidential candidates will go the public route.

I have always thought that provision of extensive free TV time for candidates, as in some European countries, could level the playing field somewhat for less well-funded candidates.

And we might benefit from a new political party. This new party, in my idealized picture, would limit itself to small contributions, and probably seek support largely from moderates, who are admittedly hard to arouse and organize.

After all, the Republican Party replaced the Whig Party in the 1850s, which foundered over the extension of slavery.

I wish I had more trenchant suggestions, yet once the Supreme Court opened the floodgates for big money, the options have become limited.