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Media Law
How Disproportionate Wealth Affects the American Election System

Introduction:

In the United States, one specific way certain individuals and organizations are able to express their free speech is through the practice of spending money. What a person or group chooses to spend their money on says a lot about who they are, what they value and what they want out of life. However, the United States is well known for being a land of equal opportunity but of unequal wealth. This wealth inequality is the basis for many domestic political issues that the United States faces. It has a particularly strong influence on the American political campaign process and ultimately the results of the political elections as well.

Expressive speech, in the form of campaign contributions (either direct donations or independent expenditures) has an immense effect on the salience of certain candidates and issues in the news media which in turn affects who and what the public votes for. This phenomenon, coupled with the disproportions in wealth of the United States and of specific sectors within the country, namely the private sector, results in certain wealthy people and corporations having the strongest agenda setting capabilities over the United States political system and its news media.

In order to mitigate the effects of wealth inequality and bring real democracy back to the United States political system, it is necessary to make reforms to campaign contributions and reverse the *Citizens United v. FEC* ruling, which enabled limitless indirect campaign financing. It is also necessary to further socialize the American political and economic system with more and different taxes, social programs and institutions and the redistribution of wealth.

Discussion:

Since the 2010 Supreme Court case of *Citizens United v. FEC*, corporations have had the ability to spend unlimited funds in the form of independent expenditures, financial political contributions that are used to create Super PACs, with the goal of indirectly supporting a specific candidate (Brown, 2016). These Super PACs have a dangerous effect on the political system by enabling these very wealthy institutions and members of the wealthy class to have a disproportionate say in the democratic system. This is important, because the affluent in America have a very different political perspective than the rest of the public.

One “survey found that the general public is more open than the wealthy to a variety of policies designed to reduce inequality and strengthen economic opportunity, including: raising the minimum wage, increasing the Earned Income Tax Credit, providing generous unemployment benefits, and directly creating jobs” (Callahan & Cha, 2013). These are policies that would benefit the vast majority of Americans who do not make more than \$100,000 per year. The wealthy are not as open to these policies because they do not need them as much. Moreover, some actively oppose the social programs, as only “40 percent of the wealthy think the minimum wage should be high enough to prevent full-time workers from being in poverty while 78 percent of the general public holds this view” (Callahan & Cha, 2013). The monopoly that the rich hold over the political system is so strong that it is preventing a truly representative democracy from taking place in the United States.

Filipe Campante, Assistant Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University, conducted one study on wealth inequality and politics that showed that “[m]ore inequality will [] have an effect of strengthening the wealth bias in the political system. In the context of redistribution, this will work in the opposite direction of the usual median voter effect” (O’Neill, 2012). The

unequal advantage that the very affluent and corporations are able to afford is creating Super PACs which “funnel unlimited contributions to political candidates, on billionaire political patrons, and on ‘big money’s’ influence on the political process” (O’Neill, 2012).

The way in which the Super PACs use these large amounts of monetary support from corporations and very wealthy people is “in the form of campaign ads and political speeches on our televisions and in our newspapers” (Ferch, 2015). This is where media salience plays such a drastic role since most Americans get their information about the world through mediated news outlets. The new and biggest of these media outlets is social media which millions of Americans rely on for their news. What they are shown however, is biased content based on algorithms that reinforce their own positions and are often corporately sponsored. New methods of biased targeting such as advertorials, sponsored content dressed up to be an op-ed or human interest stories, leaves the public unaware that the perspectives they are accepting are carefully crafted by the elite.

These “big money” contributions are the primary cause of the vast inequality in whose political speech is being heard by the wider public. Though the argument for whether corporations should have any say in the marketplace of ideas, is debatable, one thing is clear-- corporations should not have limitless power to spend an exorbitant amount of money for the purpose of persuading the American public to vote one way or another. That is what fuels the largest Super PACs in the country and that is the primary concern of most campaign finance reform advocates. However, the study conducted by Professor Campante also found that “even if you shut down the big money, the small money is enough to bias the political system” (O’Neill, 2012). Therefore, campaign finance reform alone would not be sufficient to fully change the

election bias being caused by the large wealth inequality among individuals in the United States. For that, it would be necessary to address wealth inequality at its core, and work to socialize the system and redistribute wealth.

The reality is, the way in which people become elected in the United States is not likely to make a transformation. “Those who wish to run for public office must raise the resources necessary to run a successful campaign to persuade voters that they are qualified and will govern in the best interests of their constituents” (Ferch, 2015). Therefore, it is the responsibility of patriotic members of society to vote for these candidates under the premise that “citizens of the United States have an obligation to be mindful of the inequality that exists in political influence due to the ways in which the wealthy use their money for political activities like the de facto appointment of candidates through campaign contributions, the funding of political campaign ads, and disproportionate influence on policy making” (Ferch, 2015). However, in order for this to be possible U.S. citizens must learn to question their government and news media, and take it upon themselves to find out more about the world around them. It is possible for those civic-minded individuals with the drive to make necessary changes for the betterment of society, to come together and see these changes through.

Conclusion:

The American Civil Liberties Union, a domestic non profit organization that has done a lot of work in the area of campaign finance reform, proposes that in order to counter the effects of money in elections, there must be “carefully drawn disclosure rules... reasonable limits on campaign contributions, and... stricter enforcement of existing bans on coordination between candidates and Super PACs” (ACLU). These indeed, would be the best first steps towards

regulating the system that we already have, while simultaneously working to pass an amendment to the Constitution that would reverse the *Citizens United v. FEC* ruling.

On the surface, it would seem as though the solution to this problem would be to ensure that the *Citizens United v. FEC* ruling be reversed with an amendment to the Constitution-- thereby realizing the American election system's desperate need for campaign finance reform. However, the true crux of the problem lies in the general inequality of wealth in America. In terms of addressing the political inequity caused by general individual differences in wealth, as Professor Campante proposed; the only way would be to entertain the idea of further socializing different systems within our capitalistic democratic republic.

Currently, the topic of socializing, is among the many of a heated political debate that the United States is facing in deciding who to elect as President of the United States in 2016. Democratic hopeful and longtime Senator of Vermont, Bernie Sanders, is running on a platform of Democratic Socialism with an aim to restructure the political and economic system in the United States in order to provide more social programs, such as universal healthcare and education, by the changing of taxes and the redistribution of wealth.

Nevertheless, introducing socialized programs that would redistribute wealth from the rich to the masses would violate the values of the capitalist free market economy, which is not something that can easily be done in the United States. Therefore, the best current solution is to slowly work towards changing both the campaign financing system and general economic policy. The continued initiatives to remove the influence of money in the political system are necessary to stop corporations from completely dominating the election process, and will help to

level the playing field for individuals to have a stronger voice in this democracy, while we make our way towards a more progressive and socialized system.

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