**Money and Politics in The Age Of Trump**

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Earlier this week millions of Americans woke up with the political hangover of a lifetime. After one of the most vitriolic campaigns in political history, and despite losing the popular vote, the bombastic billionaire Donald J. Trump had ridden a wave of anger at the political establishment to be elected the 45th president of the United States.

Trump’s victory has profound implications for a whole host of issues. Not the least of these is the structure of our democracy, including the role of money in politics. While the issue of voter suppression rightly got the most attention in the lead-up to November 8, Trump’s win — and with it the chance to appoint the next Supreme Court justice (and maybe more) — also looks like a big setback for those who want more robust campaign finance laws.

Even before Election Day, moreover, the success of Trump’s media-driven campaign was fueling the idea that political spending just doesn’t matter that much. On both counts, campaign finance reformers definitely have some soul-searching to do. But the story isn’t so simple. Big money politics may not have enabled Trump’s rise in the conventional sense, but it still plays a pivotal role in American elections, especially in down-ballot races. And it is the dominance of our political system by wealthy elites that helped to fuel the deep well of frustration that Trump harnessed so effectively to power his campaign

We will be studying what happened for years to come, but let’s start with the obvious: Trump may be a (self-described) billionaire, but he won despite having less campaign money — a lot less. While we won’t know the complete fundraising totals until next January, it appears Hillary Clinton’s campaign and supportive outside groups [outraised](https://www.opensecrets.org/pres16/) Trump and his groups by almost 2-1. The fundraising discrepancy between Trump and his primary opponents was [even greater](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/us/elections/election-2016-campaign-money-race.html). A lot of that anti-Trump money paid for high-priced attack ads of questionable value. This shows that, especially at the presidential level, the money race is not always outcome-determinative. It matters not just how much you raise, but how you spend it. And media coverage can allow even a relatively under-funded candidate to maintain a high profile.

Of course, even Trump benefited from hundreds of millions of dollars in spending — so money wasn’t irrelevant. More importantly, the presidency is not the only office in the land. In fact, given their scale and level of media saturation, modern presidential campaigns are strikingly different from most down-ballot races. There is [reams](http://www.brennancenter.org/publication/after-citizens-united-story-states) of [evidence](http://www.brennancenter.org/publication/secret-spending-states) indicating that Citizens United and related court cases allowing unlimited campaign spending have actually had the most direct impact on electoral and policy outcomes at the state and local level, in races that get far less attention, where even a comparatively small infusion of cash (say $100,000 rather than $1 million) can make a big difference. Trump’s surprise victory does nothing to detract from that reality.

Still, you might ask, does any of this really matter? At a time when so much is at stake, focusing on the ins and outs of campaign finance regulation may feel like the definition of losing the forest for the trees.

The problem with this critique is that it ignores perhaps the single most powerful dynamic at play in the 2016 campaign, namely the disdain so many Americans of all ideological stripes feel toward an economic and political system that isn’t working for them. Those feelings animated not only Trump’s supporters, but also those of Clinton’s primary opponent, Bernie Sanders. It’s likely they also had a hand in the decision of millions of eligible voters not to vote.

This widespread disenchantment feeds off a sense that politics is a game for the wealthy and connected, who direct government policy to further their own interests. Overwhelming majorities, including 80 percent of Republicans, [say](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/06/02/us/politics/money-in-politics-poll.html) there is “too much money in politics.” And with money comes influence — more than ordinary Americans think they can ever hope to wield.

This is why on Tuesday campaign finance [reform initiatives](http://www.sightline.org/2016/11/08/2016-democracy-reform-ballot-initiatives-roundup/) passed not only in blue coastal enclaves, but also deep-red places like South Dakota. Trump himself has made [statements](http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/trump-wrong-about-basically-everything-except) critical of Citizens United (even if his intent to follow through on them is at best [questionable](http://electionlawblog.org/?p=89187)).

None of this lets reform advocates off the hook, however. The 2016 election result came as a surprise to many, and it calls for some honest reflection. When it comes to money in politics, here are a few questions we ought to be asking:

First, how can we do more to channel campaign resources toward institutions that can actually foster the better governance Americans plainly want? One idea is to pass measures that help to both strengthen and, critically, democratize political parties. Party organizations used to be the primary engines of grassroots citizen mobilization. As the organizing force behind broad political coalitions, they also fostered the sort of flexibility and openness to compromise necessary to governing. But in recent decades, the parties, while still possessing potent brand names, have been eclipsed by individual candidates and, more recently, super PACs and other outside groups who can raise unlimited funds under Citizens United. Stringent campaign finance laws focused on rooting out party-related corruption have arguably exacerbated that trend. Completely deregulating party fundraising is not the answer, but there are a variety of other [reforms](http://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/publications/Stronger_Parties_Stronger_Democracy.pdf) that could bolster the parties’ ability to bring citizens into the political process while moderating the most extreme tendencies of both voters and officeholders. These include small donor public financing, which can boost participation and improve the quality of government by bringing more diverse voices into the political process, as it has in [New York City](http://www.brennancenter.org/publication/donor-diversity-through-public-matching-funds).

Second, has the single-minded focus on “corruption” been counter-productive? Preventing corruption and its appearance are the only justifications the Supreme Court has ever recognized for most campaign finance limits. Even advocates who disagree with the Court’s jurisprudence have tended to follow its lead by adopting the narrow corruption frame in making their case to the public. But the notion that American politics is pervasively corrupt — that, as Trump repeated so often on the campaign trail, “the system is rigged” — may exacerbate the very public cynicism and anger that has made actual governing so difficult. Corruption is certainly a real problem, but advocates should consider making the case for their proposals more in terms of the positive democratic ideals they further rather than the negative effects they prevent.

Finally, we should also be asking how campaign finance reform relates to the broader constellation of proposals to create a democracy that works for everyone. So many aspects of the 2016 election are deeply troubling, including documented [voter suppression](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/11/north-carolina-early-voting/506963/), the ongoing effects of [partisan gerrymandering](http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2016/11/06/house-redistricting-gerrymandering-polarization-paralysis-column/93258916/), and — at least for some — the fact that the [winner of the popular vote](http://www.cnn.com/2016/11/09/politics/donald-trump-hillary-clinton-popular-vote/) lost the electoral college for the second time in under two decades. They call for solutions rooted in the same values of fairness, accountability, and inclusion that animate the strongest campaign finance reform ideas. It would be a great mistake to silo the latter from the broader push for a more just and equitable political system.

These are just a few of the many questions worth pondering in the wake of the 2016 election. The road ahead is not one that many of us expected, and it will not be easy. But it is the one we are on, and the stakes could not be higher.

**http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-i-weiner/money-and-politics-in-the\_b\_12916042.html**