

Work Together to Reclaim Democracy From Big Money's

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It will take courage by elected officials to revamp a system dependent on special interest money.

JANUARY 17, 2012 • By Nikki Love

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Last week the Washington Post ran a political cartoon titled “American Optimism 2012.” It featured a man decked out in stars and stripes, standing on top of a huge mountain of cash labeled “SUPER PAC CAMPAIGN DONATIONS.” Hoisting a big shovel, the man is digging earnestly into the cash, saying, “There’s a democracy in here somewhere.”

Will we be able find it? In the enormous piles of campaign cash expected in 2012, it’s going to take serious work on the part of citizens and elected officials to dig our democracy out of this mess. The controversial 2010 Supreme Court decision in Citizens United v. FEC paved the way for unlimited spending by corporations and unions to influence elections. New Super PACs and other entities are popping up at the federal and state levels to take advantage of these new opportunities for big campaign money.

Overhauling the system won’t be easy. It will take courage on the part of our elected officials, who will have to buck the system and take a stand for rebuilding democracy. But if they are paying attention to the public, they would see that cleaning up money-in-politics is an easy way to win points with voters. According to Civil Beat’s recent poll, an overwhelming majority of Hawaii voters believe that big money rules when it comes to political influence, and they don’t think that’s right.

The concern about campaign finance is becoming more widespread, turning up regularly in the news and pop culture. Occupy Wall Street helped bring issues of

corporate influence and political and economic inequality to the forefront. Comedian Stephen Colbert is making a mockery of the post-Citizens United system, first with his satirical “Colbert Super PAC,” then the nonprofit conduit “Colbert Super PAC SHH Institute,” and just a few days ago, the newly renamed “Definitely Not Coordinating with Stephen Colbert Super PAC.”

The problem is clear. We can become resigned to it and become cynical. Or, if you have a bit of optimism left and the energy to pick up a shovel, here’s what we can do.

At the federal level, the time is ripe for a U.S. constitutional amendment to overturn *Citizens United v. FEC*. Five constitutional amendments have been proposed so far, and the concepts range from regulation of campaign spending to the broader issue of corporate personhood. A constitutional amendment is definitely not easy, but the movement is gaining momentum nationwide. Hawaii legislators have supported the concept by passing resolutions in 2010 and 2011, and as Civil Beat found, two-thirds of Hawaii voters support the idea. Let’s urge our Congressional delegation to lead the way.

At the state level, our legislators should act now to ensure transparency in money and influence in Hawaii’s political process.

Shine the light on campaign spending by corporations, unions, PACs, and Super PACs. In Hawaii, transparency for donations to candidates is fairly strong, but our laws regarding independent expenditures are very weak. This kind of spending by outside groups — PACs, Super PACs, corporations, and other entities — is becoming more significant, and voters should be able to find out who is funding these expenditures. In response to these new trends, other states are beefing up their disclosure requirements, and Hawaii is falling behind. This year, our legislators should take action to require corporations, unions, and other entities to disclose their independent expenditures, require more details in reports by PACs and Super PACs, and require disclosure of the hidden funders of campaign advertisements.

Expose the details of lobbying. Wouldn’t it be nice if everyone had their own lobbyist? Your lobbyist could be at the State Capitol all day, monitor your favorite bills, sit in long hearings and wait to testify, propose amendments to bills, take legislators out to lunch, host fancy receptions, and attend campaign fundraisers of key decision-makers. You’d

have a much better chance of making sure your voice is heard.

But only certain interests have lobbyists, while much of the public is left out of the fast-paced and complicated legislative process. To make our policymaking process more transparent and promote accountability to the public, we need more robust disclosure of lobbying activities. Reports should include more details of the lobbying expenses, gifts, and wining-and-dining that is done on behalf of the well-funded interests who can afford it. Lobbying reports should also be completed in a more timely manner, so that lobbying during the height of the legislative session is disclosed to the public before the legislature makes final decisions and closes the session.

Strengthen publicly funded elections, so candidates can say no to special interests. Publicly funded elections remains one of the best tools for campaign reform, allowing candidates to run for office using public funds, instead of relying on big donations. The Hawaii County Council pilot program was launched in 2010, and now four of the nine districts are represented by candidates who took no special interest money — making them accountable to the voters, instead of donors. The Legislature should work to strengthen and expand publicly funded elections for the future.

As 2012 unfolds, we need everyone to help keep these issues at the forefront and take action together. Ask your elected officials what they are doing in the areas of campaign finance, lobbying, and transparency in government. If you'd like to learn more, join our "Democracy Under the Influence" discussion series, where we explore current topics in money, politics, and influence in Hawaii. Our next meetup is Wednesday, February 8 and the series continues every second Wednesday of the month at 5:30 p.m. at the Laniakea YWCA in downtown Honolulu. These discussions are cosponsored by Common Cause Hawaii, Kanu Hawaii, and the League of Women Voters of Hawaii. For more information and updates, visit <http://www.commoncause.org/HI/undertheinfluence>.

About the author: *Nikki Love is the executive director of Common Cause Hawaii, a nonpartisan nonprofit organization dedicated to improving citizen participation in the political process and holding government accountable to the public interest.*

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About the Author



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Patricia Blair · University of Nebraska-Lincoln

But don't our Congressional delegations like the funding that they receive from corporations and special interest?

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Andrew Walden · Honolulu, Hawaii

It is amusing to read a blog complaining about "big money influence" posted on a website subsidized by the richest guy in Hawaii.

Like · Reply · 1 · Jan 17, 2012 10:47am



Choon James

In all fairness, don't you think Civil Beat has helped improve conversations about public affairs in Hawaii? We should never think perfectly alike but anyone who sponsors public involvement and dialogue deserves a star on his/her forehead.

Like · Reply · 2 · Jan 18, 2012 2:15am



Drew Astolfi · Stage Director at The Center for Community Change

Choon James I agree Choon - I think civil beat has improves the dialogue...

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Andrew Walden · Honolulu, Hawaii

Choon James It seems that you are saying "Big Money Influence" is OK when you believe that the influence is positive. So really what we're talking about here is not any inherent evil of "Big Money Influence" but rather whether some "Big Money Influences" are positive or negative. So the perceived problem has nothing to do with "Big Money" at all.

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**Dennis Tynan**

Right on, Nikki!

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**Choon James**

I agree!

Like · Reply · Jan 18, 2012 2:17am

**Drew Astolfi** · Stage Director at The Center for Community Change

Great op-ed!

Our democracy cannot survive the collapse of the middle class, and the domination of politics by money. It is killing any attempt at hashing out what the common good is. I applaud Common cause for taking this on so consistently.

Like · Reply · Jan 18, 2012 8:05pm

**Paul Pothier**

The average American's vote is just a commodity now to be bought and sold between the wealthiest individuals and for profit corporations rather than a citizen's support for politicians that work to bring reform and implement policy that benefits and protects the American worker and the national interest.

The 2010 Supreme Court Citizens United verdict gave corporations and wealthy individuals the freedom to contribute money without limits to Super PACs, Political Action Committees (PAC), and without immediate disclosure. That's the problem.

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