**[Slide 1 – Title]**

**APSA Mini Lecture #3 – Money in Politics**

Money in American Politics today takes several insidious forms: 1) big money and dark money undermines democratic elections; 2) money in lobbying undermine democratic representation; 3) money buys media bias and public opinion; and 4) money creates corruption.

[Slide 2 – Watergate]

Because money has such a large effect on both elections and the passage of government laws and regulations, there have been many efforts to regulate it. The last really big reform came after the Watergate break in forced President Nixon from office and caused major election reform legislation to be passed.

[Slide 3 – Citizens United]

The greatest recent changes in the rules governing money in politics have been made by Supreme Court decisions like the *Citizens United* case which have ruled that corporations are persons and have first amendment rights. This allows them to exercise their first amendment rights of free speech to give almost unlimited amounts of money.

[Slide 4 – Spending]

Elections continue to be more expensive each election. Successful candidates have to purchase staff, headquarters, software and computer programs, and most importantly, mass media, cable TV, and social media. This is in addition to the usual campaign expenses of brochures, buttons, direct mail, and the like. Getting the word out to tens of thousands or a couple million voters does not come cheap. For major city campaigns, TV ads are needed, and a week’s worth of saturation ads on a few key stations cost more than $250,000. Despite a robust and successful social media campaign, volunteers, and paid workers going door to door candidates need to raise ever more money.

In cities like Chicago, aldermanic campaigns cost more than $250,000; mayor campaigns cost more than $5 million. Nationally, the 2020 elections cost more than $14 billion. Winning congressional campaigns cost several million dollars and U.S. Senate campaigns cost tens if not hundreds of millions of dollars.

Candidates generally cannot raise this level of funding by small contributions alone. So called “big money” from wealthy individuals, businesses, labor unions, and interest groups are needed to contribute.

Overall, money speaks and officials listen. The wealthy have powerful influence because their campaign contributions determine the outcome of most elections. Because of this, curbing the massive influence of money in politics is central to democracy’s rebirth.

There is little doubt that all this money in politics has a corrosive effect that undermines democracy. As Benjamin Page and Martin Gilens put it, “We believe that both major parties tend to be corrupted--and pushed away from satisfying the needs and wishes of ordinary Americans--by their reliance on wealthy contributors. We see this reliance as one of the major reasons for today’s feeble state of democratic responsiveness. . . . U.S. officials are clearly dependent on private money. . . . [Moving from a principle of one person, one vote] toward a principle of one dollar, one vote.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

[Slide 5 - Dark Money]

**Dark Money**

Because of Supreme Court decisions like the *Citizen’s United* decision, Super PACs can now be formed which allow individuals and corporations to give almost unlimited amounts of money. And the PACs do not have to disclose their donors. This means that hundreds of millions of dollars influence the winners of election campaign and the public doesn’t know who has contributed or the interests they may be pursuing.

[Slide 6 – Negative Ads]

One very bad side effect of PAC and SuperPac dark money is that it is most often spent on negative ads against opponents. This frequently drives voters to believe all politicians are crooked and not to vote at all.

**[Slide 7 – Working Class**

**Money Translates into Control**

Money translates into control of the government and governmental policies in a number of ways.

1. Big money and high campaign costs limit the candidates who can run. The high cost of campaigns filters out candidates who are not wealthy themselves or who hold policy views unacceptable to wealthy individuals or organizations.
2. People who hold working class jobs make up less than 10 percent of the average city council and less that 3 percent of the average state legislature. The average member of Congress spent less than 2 percent of his or her adult life doing the kinds of jobs most Americans go to every day. None of America’s governors were blue-collar workers when they got into politics.”[[2]](#endnote-2) So there is a clear class bias as to who can be elected to office, from city council to president. This inevitably means that the class bias in office holders eliminates life experiences and perspectives of the working class and often even middle-class perspectives
3. Beyond the class biases of elected officials themselves, campaign giving is a way for the wealthy to buy access to influence those officials. When an elective official decides which phone call to return or with which group to meet, large campaign contributors go to the top of the list. It does not mean that public officials always grant every wish of every large donor, but donor requests are listened to and their wishes are factored into decision-making.

[Slide 8 – Class Bias]

If the only the wealthy hold office themselves it makes policy differences::

* Members of Congress who are wealthier are more likely to oppose the estate tax.
* Mayors from business backgrounds shift city resources away from social safety net programs and toward business-friendly infrastructure projects.
* Legislators with more education and income are less likely to support policies that would reduce economic income inequality.
* Lawmakers with more money in the stock market are more likely to raise the debt ceiling and thereby protect the stock market.

[Slide 9 – Lobbying]

**Lobbying**

Not only does money influence elections, lobbying after elections affects the making of government laws and policies.

Wealthy individuals, corporations, and unions hire lobbyists who press their case for laws and regulations that favor their clients. For many government units such as Congress, there are more lobbyists than public officials. And they can focus on just the issues that concern their clients, not the several thousand proposals a congressman or bureaucrat must consider. These lobbyists present detailed information and, sometimes actually draft the legislation or regulations they wish to see enacted.

There are many more lobbyists for wealthy interests and business groups than there are for labor unions and the poor. So, unless the public is mobilized in opposition, the wealthy interests win out.

**Differences in Policies**

It might not matter that the wealthy were influential if they represented the same views as other constituents Therefore, one of the key questions about donor and lobbying influence has been whether the policies favored by the wealthy interests differ significantly from popular opinion and the desires of other citizens. Special regulations or tax breaks that favor individuals or corporations are obvious examples of where access pays off in favorable policies for the wealthy as opposed to average citizens. It is the citizens who end up paying higher taxes and having fewer protections.

[Slide 10 – Public Opinion]

**Money Can Change Public Opinion**

Money can be used to create think tanks, buy political ads, hire expert witnesses for court cases, and buy media empires like Fox News or CNBC. All of which can be used to promote liberal or conservative ideas in ways that changes public opinions and makes officials more likely to enact policies which now the wealthy and the public advocate.

[Slide 11 – Solutions]

There are a variety of solutions which have been offered to overcome undue effects of money in politics. Some of them are.

* Candidates and Citizen Lobbyists have sufficient public funding to run campaigns and lobby.
* Representatives actually represent a majority of their constituents.
* Government matchs small private donations to candidates.
* Vouchers for a set amount are provided to each reg­istered voter.
* Free television coverage of candidate debates and free mailing.
* Prevent public officials from lobbying other units of government.
* Prevent former public officials from lobbying government for several years after they leave the government.
* “People’s lobbyists” or to public subsidies to public interest organizations to present policy alternatives.

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1. Page and Gilens, Democracy in America?(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 111-113. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Nicholas Carnes, The Cash Ceiling: Why Only the Rich Run for Office and What We Can Do about It (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)