

Time for a Third Party Movement?  
Incivility, Inequity and Inefficiency in Our National Government  
Public Frustration Over It: The Cause, and What We Can Do About It

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I have waited for change in the first two years of the Obama administration. During this time the Republicans have dithered and obstructed most obnoxiously while the Democrats have managed a Great Recession by bailing out the billionaire perpetrators at taxpayers' expense, by failing to expose and hold accountable the individual perpetrators and benefactors, by leaving most of these same perpetrators in charge of even larger "Too Big To Fail" corporations, and by saddling the middle class with the prolonged financial burden in lost jobs, reduced wealth, and home foreclosures. And under inept Democratic leadership, the obstructionists, Tea Party fear mongers, and corporate lobbyists have managed to delay and severely water down efforts to reform both health care and financial regulation. In addition and in spite of promises to the contrary, we are still pursuing Islamic terrorism as if we do not share in its evolution and persistence, and we continue on our nation building quests in Iraq and Afghanistan as if the worldviews of warlords, religious sects and ethnic groups can be easily converted to adopt our federalist, secular, democratic, and capitalist principles. In sum, meaningful change under Democratic Party control of our national government is hard to identify while the Republican role has been crassly partisan and glaringly duplicitous. As it stands, our government is a shambles, and along with many other citizens I am very frustrated by the results of how it is being operated by our two major political parties.

In the midst of this mostly failed 111th Congress, our politicians on all sides have avoided addressing the core underlying problem that 1) informs and vastly complicates virtually every domestic and international challenge before us and that 2) is the primary source of the contentious relations among both our political parties and our citizens. This central underlying problem is the horrendously negative effect of moneyed special interests in our political process. The integrity of our government as well as its ability to function efficiently is significantly undermined by the effects of our excessively moneyed campaign process together with the very substantial influence special interest contributors and their lobbyists wield in both the formulation of legislation and the enforcement of the law in the regulatory process. And in recent years, these same moneyed interests have entered the judicial arena and are having a similar impact on the election of judges and the nature of the decisions they render from the bench. As it stands, we have what we deserve: the best

government Big Money can buy. Big Money drives our ship of state, plain and simple. It funds successful campaigns which guarantees access for the funders' cash rich lobbyists which results in representatives and judges serving the special interests of these funders as much or more than the common good. Whatever the protestations to the contrary, the way our democracy currently works, there exists a built in conflict of interest for our representatives between their pragmatic need to accumulate the funds to attain and retain political office from powerful and wealthy special interests and their ideal commitment to support legislation to serve the American people. This built in conflict and the abundant evidence of its negative effects in special concessions, subsidies, and earmarks in legislation and revolving door "arrangements" for lawmakers and their staffs leaves the public with constant reason to suspect corruption and to question the motives of our elected representatives. No wonder trust and faith in our national government is so low!

It has become clear that neither the Republicans nor the Democrats are willing to really take this core money problem on and truly resolve it. As a result we are threatened by the prospect of our nation rotting from this infested core. And now, with the recent Supreme Court ruling permitting corporations to participate directly and in unlimited ways in the campaign process, the underlying mess is guaranteed to become a true political black hole that is able to consume anything truly democratic that gets close to it. As it stands, both of our major parties spend most of their time mucking about in this money mess unable to get any real traction on any issue without being blocked by some powerful moneyed interest group [or consortium of such groups] that holds the Congress hostage with its control of the election purse strings. Both parties have spent so much time in this mess that dwelling in the money muck and mire has become just "the way things are."

The public is hugely and rightfully frustrated by the inequity, inefficiency, smell of corruption, and lack of civility in our government, but unfortunately most of this public does not properly identify the pervasive effects of money as the underlying cause. Instead, it allows itself to get caught up in off target, anti-government movements that provide no solution in their knee jerk "kick the bums out" and "limited government" agendas. If we are tempted to follow these off target leads, we just trade one set of bums for another set because the same conditions continue to exist that turn good people into bums in the first place. If government is effective and fair and truly serves the needs of the people, there is no legitimate argument for it to be "necessarily" limited.

Personally, I have lost faith that either of our major political parties is willing to do more to clean up our money in government problem than fuss around the

edges, leaving the bulk of the cancer in place. So, after waiting and noting that this critical matter is never identified as a major concern, I have concluded that it is time for a REAL third party movement. And if properly conceived, this movement will be understood as neither liberal nor conservative because it is the democratic principle of truly representative government that is the defining issue, and this principle is fundamental to both liberal and conservative political views. The single goal of this new party movement is to return government to the people with representatives that represent the people and not those interests who stuff the campaign funding box or offer lucrative revolving door jobs and directorships. Only representatives that are freed from the need to raise money to support campaigns and to fund their retirement portfolios can really focus on the needs of the people and the needs of the nation. To achieve its single goal, this third party movement requires that the conditions be met so that the campaigns of all candidates to federal level elective office are limited in time and publicly funded. Public funding must be mandatory if it is to resolve the current crisis – no opt-out options. And primary and election campaigns must each be restricted to time periods that are reasonable for each type of office so that our representatives can truly focus most of their attention on national business. If the federal government institutes real reform of the campaign process, it is likely that most individual states will follow suit, and we will see the moneyed mess cleaned up at nearly all political levels.

For mandatory public funding of campaigns to succeed and have the desired effect, a third party movement must require that two other conditions be met in the changes that are instituted. First, the role of all secondary organizations, including corporations, in campaigns must be carefully limited to input on issues. These organizations cannot be allowed to promote or attack individual candidates. Second, all information pertaining to a campaign that is disseminated for public consumption in any form using any medium must be fair and accurate. The time has come to require better of ourselves than allowing in the name of free speech the sleazy half-truths, disinformation and spin that are commonly used to influence public opinion. This kind of political speech has the same effect as yelling “fire” in a theater – it evokes false fear and encourages thought to be overridden by emotion. “Swiftboating” and dissembling has to end if we want reliable information to be the foundation for elections and government. To put an end to this kind of destructive political behavior, we must demand of ourselves that we give up the long tradition of treating politics as if it is a game, as if it is an entertainment in which we root for our favorite team and permit ourselves to shout invective and hyperbole as if our team has either scored a goal or just lost the match. Politics is real; it is the arena in which we manage the distribution and use of our collective resources; it is serious business that we need to attend to directly and carefully; it is not a game

where the consequences are symbolic and fictional and where our participation is merely vicarious.

To create a reliable foundation of information on candidates, a third party effort must insist that our elections be structured to require all candidates to create a comprehensive platform statement for public distribution at the outset of their campaigns. This platform must indicate the candidate's general political philosophy, his or her positions on all major issues, his or her educational, occupational and employment history, his or her major financial interests over the past ten years, and his or her record of all past actions and positions taken related to all major issues.

To assure that all campaign platforms, literature and "ads" and all input on issues by secondary organizations are fair and accurate, it is essential that an effective, independent election commission be established to pass on the veracity of all such materials – prior to their being disseminated. And an important part of this commission's job has to be to respond immediately to all incorrect or significantly incomplete political and issue claims made on the Internet, on talk shows, or reported in the news media. If we understand the value of a permanent federal level consumer protection agency, we should be able to recognize the need for a parallel voter and campaign protection agency.

We must insist that Congressional and judicial candidates win office on the basis of their integrity and the quality of their ideas and proposals, not the amount of money they can raise to swamp the Internet and the media with outrageous claims for themselves and half-truth attacks against their opponents. If it takes a constitutional amendment to achieve this result and to by-pass the recent horrendous decision of the Supreme Court, then it should be the duty of a new third party movement to support this effort and get it done – as soon as possible. Properly conceived, a concerted grass roots campaign to address this issue should have the ability to attract liberals and conservatives alike, and it could make short work of achieving such an amendment.

If Americans offer massive support to this third party platform, the major parties may wake up to the challenge and themselves get serious about offering a substantive solution to our current money mess in politics. If Americans elect candidates who support this platform and if these elected representatives follow through and institute the needed reforms, a great many of our country's problems will either disappear or be greatly reduced in their significance. We should expect the subsequent adjustments to include an elimination of most of the political bickering, and posturing, and spinning, and obstructing that so diminishes both the efficiency of government and the civility of political relations.

Debates can return to being about real differences of opinion and interpretations of the facts. And with a return to civil relations among representatives, we can expect the political process to lead to true compromise on issues, compromise that serves the people. Special interests will have their place in this new arena for governing, but they will no longer drive the ship of state by toting their money bags through the halls of Congress, the White House, and the courts. And the American people can once again take pride in their national government – whoever is in power, and release the need to engage in unproductive anti-government rhetoric and “movements” that confuse legitimate protest with attacks on the very institutions that provide our democratic opportunity. Government per se is not the problem; poorly functioning, conflicted, contentious, self-serving, and special interest serving government is the problem. And money is what is “buying” such a diminished form of government for us. Anti-government agendas miss this critical point.

Yes, this is a single-issue third party movement, but assuring that our government is truly representative is the keystone of our democracy, the issue upon which the integrity of all the rest of our government depends. Turning this essential issue to the right or the left by appending other political or ideological objectives will only prove divisive and undermine the viability of the essential cause. Fair and proper campaigns and elections are fundamental to both liberals and conservatives. If we get this one right, liberal and conservative views will still exist, but they will not be invested with the same divisive emotional nonsense that is currently promoted by all the disinformation and dissembling that special interest money underwrites.

The time has come to clean up the money mess in our national politics. This issue has to become front and center in our national consideration, and without a grass roots third party movement to insist that this matter be truly addressed, it seems clear that the major parties are not up to the challenge. So, let's get going! “We, the people!”