



How Student Activists are Sparking Efforts to Take Big Private Money out of American Politics

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The huge amounts of private and often secret money flooding into the U.S. political system undermine trust and broad participation in American democracy. When a tiny fraction of the population provides the lion's share of funding for election campaigns, as is now the case in the United States, public policymaking becomes heavily biased toward wealthy contributors and repeatedly falls short of serving the common good.

A number of national reform organizations have emerged to address this problem – some founded decades ago – but they have made insufficient headway. Two difficulties plague their efforts. These organizations have not done much grassroots organizing and they have neglected young people. To address these shortcomings, we joined forces in 2001 with Adonal Foyle, a thirteen-year veteran of the National Basketball Association, to launch a national organization called Democracy Matters that stresses campus-based organizing.

Campus Organizing for Campaign Finance Reforms

Democracy Matters offers internships to college students who organize people on their campuses for efforts to reduce the power of private money in politics. With an emphasis on face-to-face organizing, Democracy Matters trains and mobilizes students through campus chapters. Members support many policies that could reduce the role of wealth in the U.S. political process, with the primary emphasis on a key reform: public campaign financing. Since its launch, Democracy Matters has experienced many successes, even though the power of private money in politics endures. A broader grassroots movement for reform seemed briefly possible during the Occupy Wall Street protests, but did not lead to enduringly organized efforts.

Student participants in Democracy Matters who have become passionate advocates for reform have made headway in educating and involving their peers. To draw attention to the money in politics issue, successful campus chapters run by student interns have organized teach-ins on money in politics, written OpEds in school papers, run educational poster campaigns, lobbied state and national elected officials, organized petition and letter-writing campaigns, created theater skits, and used social media to get the word out. Democracy Matters groups have also built coalitions with student organizations that focus on environmental issues, the rising cost of higher education, divestment from fossil fuel industries, and the rights of women, students of color, and gay, lesbian and bisexual students. To ensure continuity, chapters teach grassroots organizing skills to younger cohorts of students.

Still, Democracy Matters organizers have faced many impediments. Even though Democracy Matters is explicitly non-partisan, interns and members have been thwarted by university rules that limit the freedom of student clubs and discourage any student activities understood as “political.” Funding is scarce for college student organizing, and especially for student groups working on behalf of money in politics reforms. Faculty members are often too busy to support student efforts outside the classroom. And students who take the lead on this vital issue often face apathy and cynicism from other students.

Building Broader Coalitions

A larger problem is the lack of a strong nationwide movement pushing – well beyond academia – for public campaign financing. Although private big donor influence undercuts every citizen group that represents non-wealthy constituencies, pushback from a broad movement has yet to emerge. Groups that represent middle-income and lower-income constituencies only infrequently work together, let alone work with campaign finance reform advocates. Unless this balkanization can be overcome, fragmented reform movements are doomed to failure.

Uncertainty hampers the development of such a broad reform coalition. Presumably, if the U.S. political system were not so dominated by private funding, a wider range of citizens would be able to significantly influence public policy, leading to new and different government policies. But there is no way to predict in advance which new policy initiatives would succeed under a new campaign finance regime. As a result, many students and other people who support contemporary social movements fighting for substantive reforms – on issues such as environmental reforms, same sex marriage, gay rights, educational reforms, gun control, women's empowerment, labor rights, and better support for the poor – tend to assign a low priority to campaign finance reform, even if they are broadly sympathetic to the cause.

To overcome this uncertainty, Democracy Matters student chapters have modeled the type of coalition-building that will be required to build a powerful national movement for reform. Because of its likely impact on multiple issues, efforts to achieve public funding of elections can attract the support of various kinds of activists and organizations. Public financing of election campaigns need not be their top priority, so long as they are convinced that such reforms would increase the probability of success for their causes. In most coalitions, members are asked to sacrifice some of their goals in order to work with others for a shared objective. But in coalitions fighting for campaign finance reforms, none of the participants have to downplay other specific policy concerns. Activism on behalf of public financing can be a win-win situation, because a reformed system of election financing promises new opportunities for other reform movements. Many movements have a stake in a wider and deeper version of U.S. democracy.

On university campuses, Democracy Matters organizers have successfully spread the message that reducing the role of private wealth in politics can make the United States more egalitarian and democratic. Public campaign finance systems have already made headway in New York City and in states like Maine, Connecticut, and Arizona, opening doors for more diverse candidates to win election and enhance government responsiveness. Now Democracy Matters is working to infuse new life into coalitions to spread such reforms, firm in the belief that today's students can recapitulate the role that young people played in earlier social movements. Again and again, young people have identified important reform goals and triggered the conscience of America in fights to enlarge democracy. Democracy Matters has found new ways to further this tradition of reform activism – but to get big private money out of U.S. politics, there is a long way to go.

Read more in Joan Mandle and Jay Mandle, *Change Elections to Change America: Democracy Matters: Student Organizers in Action* (Prospecta Press, 2014).

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