

[Director of Democracy Matters Talks Sex, Politics and Money](#)

Joan Mandle Challenges Students to Take Back Our Democracy

By Kaitlin Cough Staff Writer

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Are our elections fair?

If you thought that just because we live in a democracy, we have fair elections, think again, said Democracy Matters director Joan Mandle.

On a drizzly Friday afternoon, several students gathered to chat with Mandle about her views on “Race, Gender, and the Money of Politics” and about how Americans can take back our government from special interest groups.

Her blue polka dotted frames, black tennis shoes and electric red sweater may not have seemed serious, but her message was: our elections *aren't* fair, and we aren't doing anything about it.

“We have among the lowest turnout of voters of any country in the world,” Mandle stated, because people think politicians are “bought and sold.”

“Everybody in Congress is up to their eyeballs in special interest money. It's no big secret,” she said.

As executive director of Democracy Matters, Mandle is doing what she can to change that. Active in the civil rights and feminist movements during her undergraduate years at Vassar and while obtaining her doctorate at Bryn Mawr, Mandle is familiar with working for tough change.

But she hastens to point out the positive impact that her often frustrating work has made on her life. “Political engagement creates meaning in your life... But really important change doesn't come easily,” she told those gathered.

For the last eight years, her commitment to civic engagement has been focused on the organization Democracy Matters, a non-partisan group working “to get big private money out of politics and people back in.”

Founded (and largely funded) by her son, Adonal Foyle, (a veteran center for the Orlando Magic) back in 2001, the organization works mainly with students by helping them connect reforms to all the hot button issues: health care, the environment, education, civil rights and more. It maintains that getting big money and corporate interests out of politics will allow for a more diverse pool of candidates.

Mandle claimed that because money is the “single most important variable” in winning elections, (apart from being an incumbent), women often can't compete. Consequently, all the issues in

which women are often most interested, such as healthcare reform, social services, and education, “tend to get short-shrift in our political system. Forty years after the women’s movement, women are nowhere politically. It’s pathetic. Since it’s money that drives elections, we lose.”

But there is hope. So far, six states—Maine, Vermont, Arizona, Connecticut, North Carolina and New Mexico—have passed what is known as “Clean Elections” legislation. In such a system, candidates have the option to rely on public financing rather than private sources, thereby allowing those who may not have had a chance before—women especially—to be competitive.

For instance, in Maine, which was a pioneer in the “Clean Elections” movement, farmers, waitresses, librarians and small business owners are just some of the candidates who have “run clean” and won. Today, 85% of the Maine legislature consists of “Clean Elections” candidates.

Sophie Papvizas ’11, former co-president of Smart Women Vote, organized the visit after completing an internship with *Common Cause*, one of the sponsors of Democracy Matters. She is working to start a chapter of the organization at Bryn Mawr in the spring and to get students involved in political issues outside of election season.

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