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**Dirty Money, Big Corn, Fat Kids, Clean Elections: Who bought your politician? Corporate money has the power to influence a politician of any stripe, Republican, Democrat or Independent, he said, and it is in the public interest to weaken that grip.**

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Trying to dig out political corruption and corporate influence is hard enough to do these days and almost as hard to explain, but Lawrence Lessig, a Harvard Law School professor and the director of the Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics at Harvard, who was on hand last week to celebrate the 10th anniversary of Maine's Clean Elections law, took one example to show how fair election laws are the most effective way to push back against corporate influence on government.

He targeted corn.

"It's just one example," said Lessig, and then he put up a slide of a fat 14-year-old and launched into a funny, fact-filled, fast-paced, follow-the-money tale that was a lot like the old lady that swallowed the fly.

In synopsis: Kids are fat. There are, in fact, three times as many obese American kids as there were in 1980 and half end up with Type 2 diabetes. Why are so many kids fat? In large part, said Lessig, because of high-fructose corn syrup that is known to pack on the pounds and is liberally used in almost everything from soda drinks to spaghetti sauce. It packs on belly fat much more effectively than sugar, which isn't good. Sugar is the better choice, but the difference in price between corn and sugar is like the difference between shopping at Walmart and shopping at Saks Fifth Avenue.

"Sounds like the free market, right?" said Lessig. "It's not quite so simple as that. We protect sugar prices with tariffs and corn has received subsidies of \$74 billion over the past 15 years."

Corn, it turns out, appears to cost more to grow than it sells for, said Lessig. Regular Joes, in similar circumstances, would go bankrupt, he said. Not corn giant Archer Daniels Midland. They hauled in \$69.2 billion in revenues in 2009.

This corporate welfare translates into big price differences at the grocery store. The price of vegetables went up 17 percent between 1997 and 2003, at the same time that a Big Mac went down in price 5.4 percent and a bottle of Coke went down 35 percent, said Lessig.

Corn products in a Big Mac? You betcha.

Because it's not just at the grocery store. Corn, being so cheap, is used to quickly fatten cattle at the feedlots

before they are slaughtered, but cattle aren't set up to digest corn (or wallow in a pit of poorly processed cow manure with hundreds of other flatulent cattle, either) so they have to be pumped full of antibiotics, said Lessig.

But it is cheap corn that makes factory beef farming possible.

"Corn is cheap. Sugar is dear. This isn't the free market at work. This is the *anti*-free market," said Lessig.

Just to be clear, Lessig is no liberal radical. He clerked for United States Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, one of the most conservative justices on the court. Corporate money has the power to influence a politician of any stripe, Republican, Democrat or Independent, he said, and it is in the public interest to weaken that grip.

So, lots of campaign cash flows in from Big Sugar, Big Corn and Big Cow.

The result of following the money isn't so funny. Remember the old lady who eventually swallowed a horse? She died, of course.

This is no free-market fable when the kid wants a snack and an apple costs twice as much as a can of Coke.

"Campaign donations like these distort production, which distorts markets, which distorts our 14-year-olds," said Lessig.

The result is an economy of influence and a marionette Congress, said Lessig, where politicians have to pay attention to those who provide the money for their campaigns, not the people they were voted to represent.

It's hardly a representative democracy.

But if the money comes from the people, by way of clean election financing, then the politicians have to answer to the people.

That, said Lessig, is the true representative democracy that Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin called for.

"We need a war against the Fat Cats," said Lessig.

Maine is celebrating its 10-year anniversary as a clean elections state, wherein citizens donate money (typically when they file a tax return) to candidates who pledge not to use corporate campaign money or large contributions from "friends." It was the first state in the country to have a clean elections law, and this year over 80 percent of Maine politicians elected in November, representing all political parties, were clean elections candidates.

The Maine Clean Elections law, however, is being challenged in federal court by Attorney James Bopp, an activist lawyer who has attacked campaign finance reform in state and federal courts around the country. Bopp's argument is that clean election laws restrict the free speech of candidates who get their campaign financing from private sources, including trade unions and corporations. Bopp's Maine affiliate is the Maine Heritage Policy Center, a conservative advocacy group.

Given the *Citizen's United* Supreme Court decision in January that ruled in favor of unlimited contributions from corporations to political action committees (mostly to fund political attack ads), clean elections financing is the last and best chance to hold on to our democracy, said Lessig.

Protecting Maine's clean election laws and expanding the clean elections laws across the country and at the federal level are important as a last hedge against a corporate takeover of our political system, he said.

"What's wrong with putting corporations in control?" asked Brenda Wright, a lawyer and the director of the

Democracy Program at Demos, a national organization. Wright shared the table with Lessig; Nick Nyhart, the president of Public Campaign, an organization backing a national clean elections law; and former Maine Governor Angus King.

Wright answered her own question.

"Because corporations answer to shareholders' wealth," she said. "That drives policy."

"Right now, if your opponent has \$1 million to spend and you don't, you have two choices: beg lobbyists for money or give a wink and a nod to your wealthy friends," said Nyhart. "This allows a third choice: to rely on the people. It won't stop the wealthy, but it does change the dynamic."

When King asked for a specific example of clean elections campaign financing translating into policy, Nyhart pointed to Connecticut, which passed a clean elections law in 2005.

"For years, a commonsense bottle bill expanding the returnables to include juice and water bottles had failed every time it was brought up," said Nyhart. "The first election after fair elections reform, the bottle bill passed. Before, legislators had to go to the lobbyist who got them campaign money and the bill never passed. Afterwards, they didn't have to do that. It's a good example of the power that money can buy."

Nyhart stressed the importance of citizens of every political party actively supporting clean elections laws. Lessig agreed.

"It gives individual citizens, ordinary citizens, more power," he said, and he urged anyone interested in preserving the democracy to get involved and to do it now.