

Freedom of campaign money damaging our democracy

George Smith

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Independence Day is the perfect time to explore the complexities of our freedom of speech.

Today, that freedom is fueling an unprecedented, secret, and destructive flow of money into our political system.

Several factors are at cause: a decision of the United States Supreme Court, the growing weakness of political parties, and the rejection by elected officials of the once-commonly-agreed-upon need for transparency in campaigns and elections.

It isn't the amount of money spent on political campaigns that aggravates me. It's the way the money is spent, the relentless and relentlessly negative attacks that provide no useful information and leave us disgusted with all of the candidates.

If all that money were spent to inform and educate us about the candidates and issues, we'd be the best educated voters on the planet. Instead, we're among the least informed, and much of the information we absorb is inaccurate and sometimes slanderous.

This problem is largely our own fault, because we allow ourselves to be influenced by the negative attacks. All of that money is spent on attacks because they work.

A June 14 One Table forum sponsored by OneMaine at Hallowell City Hall explored the role of money in politics. OneMaine is a new group advocating for less partisanship in politics.

The forum's distinguished panel was outstanding: Lance Dutson, executive director of the **Maine Heritage Policy Center**, Alison Smith, president of Maine Citizens for Clean Elections, Anthony Corrado, Colby College government professor, Jonathon Wayne, director of Maine's Commission on Ethics and Election Practices and Colin Woodard, historian, author, and state and national affairs reporter for the Portland Press Herald. Sarah Skillins Woodard of OneMaine moderated the lively and stimulating discussion.

Dutson jumped out quickly, challenging conventional thinking that the amount of money in politics is a problem. He contended that it is dangerous to limit campaign messages or try to give equal weight and exposure to every point of view.

Woodard, who impresses me more every time I hear him speak, noted that the current system is "terrible for everyone, including candidates who can't control spending or messages of supporting groups."

"It's impossible for voters to find and understand (campaign) financial reports," he noted, "and donations are laundered in all sorts of ways." He offered Act Blue as an example, a liberal group that collects money from its donors and gives it to candidates without disclosing the donors' names.

Franz reported that he's concerned about the move away from parties and candidates. Today, he noted, it's difficult to tell what a group's motives and interests are.

Franz also explored a subject that gets little attention, the world of lobbying, calling it his major concern. He noted that "people have the power on the campaign side, but not on the lobbying side."

That reminded me of one of the most destructive acts in recent Maine political history -- the enactment of legislative term limits. The people made that horrible decision, but they were influenced by the money of a single individual who funded the term limits petition drive and referendum campaign.

Corrado offered several intriguing comments, including his view that "the promise of political equality is overcome by economic inequality." He noted that today's system "encourages money into the unregulated area -- and is harmful to organized parties."

"This diminishes the sense of the individual voter that he or she can make a difference, and lowers participation," he said.

While technology allowed candidates to amass contributions from small donors for a while, "big dollars and donors are gaining precedence now," Corrado reported, calling it "the worst situation since Watergate."

He stated that the touchstone of our system was transparency and disclosure, but that consensus has broken down. Many politicians now claim that "disclosure chills free speech." Disclosure has become the battleground.

He noted that the court has been "incoherent" in establishing integrity in the electoral process, unable to "decide where to draw the line between free speech and equality." I thought that summed up the problem nicely.

Jonathon Wayne did a good job on the panel as a nonpartisan government official, explaining Maine's current clean elections system while staying out of the line of fire. Alison Smith took on Dutson and others, defending the clean elections system as one that "levels the playing field," and "opened up the legislative process to ordinary citizens."

I loved the closing remarks, with Franz stating, "If people don't like Super Pac ads, they can turn off their TVs -- or ignore the ads."

Dutson agreed. "Everyone gets a vote," he exclaimed. "Voters are not mindless drones."

I'd say the jury is still out on that one.

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