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Lies of the Ethics Industry

How the champions of "good government" suppress speech and sow cynicism

Terry Michael | April 30, 2010

Our 21st century politics might be regarded as an ethical golden age—at least in contrast to the corruption of the 19th century, when senators were on railroad payrolls and urban machines pilfered public treasuries. Yet according to a recent Pew Research Center survey, only 22 percent of citizens now trust government "almost always or most of the time."

Ironically, the trust deficit is partly a result of the very transparency rules adopted to encourage confidence in government. Enacted after some idiots in Richard Nixon's White House broke into the Watergate offices of the Democratic National Committee—apparently guided by the aphorism "nothing's too cheap to steal"—transparency laws were supposed to shine light on the influence of cash. Which they did. But they also left an even bigger impression that money is the root of all public policy evil.

Four groups now work to convince us we have the worst government money can buy: (1) an *ethics industry* spawned in Washington by Watergate, which features nonprofits lobbying for regulation of speech they don't like; (2) *journalists* who collude with ethics purveyors, writing cheap-and-easy stories fitting a corruption narrative they create; (3) *politicians*, especially Democratic Progressive Era throwbacks, who think evil-doing can be stopped with new and better rules and who pander to the ethics industry, the media, and (ironically) to citizens convinced that Democrats are just as sleazy as Republicans; and (4) *citizens*, frustrated by the budget-busting consequences of the free lunches we accept from politicians.

The usual suspects will be familiar to viewers of TV news features devoted to topics like "keeping them honest" and "it's your money." A self-described citizens' lobby, Common Cause, was founded in 1970. It

spawned a series of other “Goo-Goo” (good government) nonprofits, including Ralph Nader’s Public Citizen in 1971; the Center for Responsive Politics in 1982, which massages finance records from candidate and PAC reports and feeds the information to friendly journalists who repeat “follow the money” as a mantra; and the Center for Public Integrity, created in 1989 by former *60 Minutes* producer Charles Lewis, who launched investigative studies that focused on money as a one-size-fits-all explanation for bad politicians and policy.

The Goo-Goos reflect the Progressive Era faith that non-partisan elites, armed with ever-expanding rules and great expertise, can serve stupid people better than greedy elected officials can. And to make matters worse, every one of their failures to legislate political morality has only encouraged ethics-mongers to propose new-and-better “reforms.” Common Cause and its sister organizations want to limit political speech that they disapprove of—i.e., speech by evil corporations. And these crusading groups all share a common cause: Goo-Goo self-perpetuation. After all, those press release writers have mouths to feed, too.

Anyone in a college journalism program during the past several decades has been advised to “follow the money” as a key to political behavior. With that limited wisdom, a young reporter quickly learns she can make the front page with a story suggesting a money-policy nexus.

Assisting journalists in these exposés of political cash are their friends in the ethics industry, ready to supply “studies” and “reports,” which often mis-aggregate donations and expenditures (figures lie just like politicians do, and liars frequently employ figures). The Goo-Goos are always prepared with sky-is-falling quotes about the dire consequences of money impinging on democracy.

What never seems to occur to journalists—especially those in the non-real world of editorial boards—is that their own publishers spend unlimited cash to speak, cash they’ve accepted from their advertisers, who usually happen to be big bad corporations.

With progressivism still their dominant theology, Democrats constantly campaign for more “reform” of money in politics, occasionally joined by “maverick” Republicans like Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.). But just like religious Republicans who get caught in the wrong beds or bathrooms, Democrats pay the hypocrisy price when they’re discovered with cash in their freezers or embarrassing gifts from criminals.

The Democratic-progressive dream is public financing of elections, an incumbent protection racket that would allow them to wage permanent campaigns with taxpayer-funded congressional staffs—all while appearing to equalize spending for electoral opponents, courtesy of your tax dollars.

Finally, the public's disappointment with government can be traced to the most likely suspects of all: the public itself. Dangerously armed with a willingness to suspend belief in the law of supply and demand, the people are always eager for a free lunch of entitlement spending, while for dessert they blast politicians for running up giant deficits.

The thus-embattled citizen then turns on the TV and reacts with fury to stories by cable-babblers, pandering to their audience of political spectators with pretensions of keeping those sleazy pols honest.

Lost in this televised Kabuki theater is any serious attempt to address the really big public policy problems facing the country, including massive entitlement payouts for the elderly, the bipartisan jobs program known as national defense, and gigantic interest payments on the national debt. Who actually believes that removing money from politics will help fix any of that?

It all recalls the old cartoon strip character, Pogo, who declared: “We have met the enemy, and he is us.”

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