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US elections 2016: ‘The system is rigged, the government coin-operated’

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/10/nation-on-the-take-wendell-potter-nick-penniman-extract>

Wendell Potter and Nick Penniman

Sunday 10 April 2016

In an extract from their new book *Nation on the Take*, Wendell Potter and Nick Penniman show how the only interests that matter in US politics are those of the wealthy elite

A few years ago, CBS News conducted a poll about Americans’ perception of government. The headline of the resulting story: *Alienated nation: Americans complain of government disconnect*.

The first sentence reads: “Americans see their leaders in Washington as overpaid agents of wealthy individuals and corporations who are largely disconnected from the concerns of average Americans.”

Wendell Potter. Photograph: Bloomsbury

We, the people, are losing our faith in the dream of democracy. As our collective power is increasingly eclipsed by a rigged system of politics and governance dominated by a handful of billionaires and a phalanx of well-financed special interests, we are growing sceptical that the promises will come true.

Right now there is no credible outside threat to our American way of life. No other nation is

sounding the death knell of ours. But the rapid proliferation of a system akin to oligarchy – within our own country – threatens to cripple our march forward.

Nick Penniman. Photograph: Erin Scott Photography

It's a threat the founding fathers knew we would always have to guard against. In the summer of 1787, when delegates to the Constitutional Convention were in the heat of their debates, they were obsessed with bribery, influence, and corruption. James Madison, who kept meticulous notes, recorded the word "corruption" 54 times. To them, the notion of corruption was both the corruption of the individual and the corruption of the system of governance. They were less obsessed with corrupt individuals – with bad apples – than with the system itself, with the orchard. The rotting of the fruit of liberty was seen as the dominance of private interests over the public interest. It was the bending of governing priorities away from the common good – a process that would, over time, fatally damage the whole project of a democratic republic – of "We, the people", of the "consent of the governed".

Seen in this light, government is us. Or it should be. We give our government our money, in the form of taxes. Then we hire its executives, through elections. Then we imbue it with directions and instructions, in the form of legislation. If all goes well, our politicians utilise our tax dollars to manifest our brightest ideas. The most exquisite dynamic is achieved when the common good is served while individual liberty is protected. No kings, no dictators. Us, in charge of ourselves, leveraging our resources behind our highest hopes, while protecting each other's freedoms, shaping our country, forever working to form "a more perfect union".

Yes, of course: there were – and always will be – bad people and bad pieces of legislation. The factions and special interests will fight for their legislative handouts and carve-outs, and politicians will lose their virtue.

Corrupt moments in our future are inevitable.

And, of course, for centuries, women, people of colour, and non-landowners were legally excluded from voting and running for office. But powerful, popular grassroots movements like suffrage, abolition, and civil rights – fuelled by the early American Enlightenment's dreams of liberation and equality – forced profound course corrections that are among this country's greatest accomplishments, not just for United States citizens but for humankind.

Today we all seem to feel as if we need another such profound course correction, one that is focused on reclaiming our right to self-government and renewing our hope in the American Dream. Correctly, we suspect that the system is rigged, our government has become coin-operated, and that we've been sidelined.

Obviously, money's dominance of politics and governing isn't the only factor behind the dysfunction of our democracy. Gerrymandered congressional districts, presidential elections entirely focused on a handful of states, low voter-turnout rates, petty and polarised political parties, superficial and partisan media, and an increasingly rude public arena all contribute to the breakdown of our ability to govern together.

But big money makes a lot of these factors worse, and it's time for the political class – which has grown way too cosy with the status quo – to step out of its elite bubble and recognise that the crisis we are in is eating away at the country.

In 1998, the total amount of money spent on federal elections was \$1.6bn. By 2012, it had nearly quadrupled to \$6.2bn.

The supreme court's 2010 Citizens United ruling was akin to crop spraying gasoline on to a wildfire. In a narrow 5-4 decision, the majority of justices asserted that corporate spending in politics is an act of free speech and should therefore be unlimited. Subsequent lower court rulings have expanded that rationale to reduce some limits on political campaign contributions, which has put the chase for political money on steroids.

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Democratic candidate debate: Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton clash over political funding.

At times, the news seems almost surreal. Take for instance, how a single family – the Kochs – which owns Koch Industries, has forged a small but very wealthy network of donors who have pledged to spend nearly \$900m influencing the outcome of the 2016 elections. That's \$500m more than the Republican National Committee spent in 2012.

On the other side of the big money equation – the fundraising side – the nonstop scramble for campaign cash is distracting and exhausting our elected officials as never before, and perpetually repelling good people from office. Members of Congress simply don't spend as much time thinking about us as they once did. They spend most of their time thinking about how to get enough money from wealthy individuals, lobbyists, and political action committees to get re-elected – it's what political operatives refer to as a “permanent campaign” mentality.

In January 2013, newly elected Democrats in the House of Representatives were being given an orientation session by the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee about how they should spend their time serving in the House – what was once referred to as the “People's House”. Among the materials they were presented with was a “model daily schedule”. That schedule provided for four hours of “call time,” one to two hours of “constituent visits”, two hours of committee hearings or floor votes, one hour of “strategic outreach”, and one hour of “recharge time”. You have no doubt already guessed what “call time” and “strategic outreach” are: fundraising.

Which means that new representatives are expected to spend half of their time either dialling for dollars or attending fundraising events.

Who are they calling? Probably not you. Certainly not us. Mostly, very wealthy donors in the richest cities in America. And who's throwing the daily fundraisers for them? Often, the very industries they are supposed to be regulating, based on their congressional committee assignments.

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Donald Trump is seen by supporters as someone outside of Washington's financial machine.

Photograph: Rhona Wise/AFP/Getty Images

The Finance Committee members rake in contributions from the bankers and their lobbyists, the Natural Resources Committee members from the oil and coal executives and their lobbyists. That's why these types of committees on Capitol Hill are referred to as "cash committees". In 2014, for instance, the top industries contributing to members of the House Financial Services Committee, formerly known as the Banking Committee, were finance, insurance, and real estate. Individuals and PACs [independent groups that collect donations] from those sectors collectively chipped \$30m into the committee members' coffers.

As Ray Plank, the founder and former chairman of the Apache Corporation, told the conservative journalist Peter Schweizer, whose book *Extortion* was later turned into a 60 Minutes episode, campaign cash and corporate contracts with well-connected lobbying firms are "protection money. It's what you expect from the mafia."

Yet, in Washington and the state capitals, such activity is not seen as mafia-like. It's run-of-the-mill. It's the way things get done. Anyone who questions it, or wants to change it, is deemed naive or – even worse – idealistic.

One of the many pernicious effects of this endless extraction of campaign cash from lobbyists and wealthy individuals is that politicians have little time to form strong relationships with one another, particularly across the aisle. For all of the newspaper editorials and Press Club forums about gridlock, partisanship, and polarisation in Washington, and all the appeals to politicians to get along, too little attention is paid to whether they have time to get along. When announcing in early 2013 that he wouldn't be seeking re-election in 2014, Senator Tom Harkin (Democrat-Iowa) remarked, "The time is so consumed with raising money now... you don't have the time for the kind of personal relationships [between lawmakers] that so many of us built up over time."

We know that the banks wield enormous power over politics in DC, but who's representing the families facing foreclosure?

Our legislators – our employees, remember – also have less time to draft, study, or pass legislation. The more than 9,000 registered lobbyists in DC are keenly aware of this vulnerability, and they are poised to take advantage of it. Collectively, they annually disclose more than \$3bn in expenses – including the many events they hold for members of Congress. The nonprofit transparency group the Sunlight Foundation tracks categories of influence peddling. One category is called "Hill coverage", which is defined as the "average percentage of

incumbent members of Congress receiving contributions from the organisation over the course of the 2008, 2010 and 2012 election cycles”. AT&T, for instance, has 88% Hill coverage – meaning that 88% of members of Congress have received contributions from AT&T sources. Honeywell International also has 88% coverage. United Parcel Service has 87%. Lockheed Martin has 80%. Comcast, General Electric, Boeing, and Verizon all have around 70%.

How much coverage do you have? How much coverage do we, the people, have? How much do Main Street businesspeople have? How much attention do people who have little or no money get in such a system?

We know that the banks wield enormous power over politics and policy decisions in DC. But who's representing the families facing foreclosure?

As Bob Dole once famously quipped: “There is no poor people's political action committee.”

There are also few members of Congress who, upon leaving the Hill, have any interest in starting a poor people's political action committee. In 1974, around 3% of former members became lobbyists. Now, half of them pass through Washington's “revolving door” and stroll from the Hill down to K Street, many of them to lobby for the industries they once oversaw, based on their congressional committee assignments. Served on the Finance Committee? Become a bank lobbyist. As the New York Times's Mark Leibovich observed: “In some sense, [they are] living proof of the thing that most voters loathe about Washington: the notion that membership in its political class guarantees a win-for-life lottery ticket.”

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It's important to point out that lobbying in its purest form is not bad. Making arguments to members of Congress is part of the democratic process. Sharing information and expertise is a good thing.

It's a form of free speech, and a healthy democracy should have plenty of lobbying going on, as long as it is occurring on behalf of all sides of an issue. Our concerns about lobbying involve the relationship between lobbying and political cash, the lobbyists who have little or no fealty to the broader public interest, and those politicians or Hill staffers who see public office as a pathway to a lucrative influence-peddling career. We are also disgusted by lobbying groups that knowingly leverage millions of dollars into false and misleading communications campaigns, which destroy the possibility of having a thoughtful, genuine debate about weighty policy ideas.

If it is functioning well, our country's project in self-government would be mainly driven by, among other virtuous objectives, national need and appropriate fiscal policy. We would not only know the right policies to enact – we would also enact them. But when government is coin-operated – when America becomes a nation on the take – the nation's needs get shoved aside like neglected children.