

Inquiring Minds topic – 18 April 2014

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Party All the Time

April 3, 2014 – David Brooks – *The New York Times*

Over the last several decades, the United States has adopted a series of campaign finance reform laws. If these laws were designed to reduce the power of money in politics, they have failed. Spending on political campaigns has exploded. Washington booms with masses of lobbyists and consultants.

But campaign finance laws weren't merely designed to take money out of politics; they were designed to protect incumbents from political defeat. In this regard, the laws have been fantastically successful.

The laws rigged the system to make it harder for challengers to raise money. In 1972, at about the time the Federal Election Campaign Act was first passed, incumbents had a campaign spending advantage over challengers of about 3 to 2. These days, incumbents have a spending advantage of at least 4 to 1. In some election years, 98 percent of the incumbents are swept back into office.

One of the ways incumbents secured this advantage is by weakening the power of the parties. They imposed caps on how much donors can give to parties and how much parties can give directly to candidates. By 2008, direct party contributions to Senate candidates accounted for only 0.18 percent of total spending.

The members of Congress did this because an unregulated party can direct large amounts of money to knock off an incumbent of the opposing party. By restricting parties, incumbents defanged a potent foe.

These laws pushed us from a party-centric campaign system to a candidate-centric system. This change has made life less pleasant for lawmakers but it has made their jobs more secure, and they have been willing to accept this trade-off.

Life is less pleasant because with the parties weakened, lawmakers have to do many campaign tasks on their own. They have to do their own fund-raising and their own kissing up to special interests. They have to hire consultants to do the messaging tasks that parties used to do.

But incumbents accept this because the candidate-centric system makes life miserable for challengers. With direct contributions severely limited and parties defanged, challengers find it

hard to quickly build the vast network of donors they need to raise serious cash. High-quality challengers choose not to run because they don't want to spend their lives begging for dough.

The shift to a candidate-centric system was horrifically antidemocratic. It pushed money from transparent, tightly regulated parties to the shadowy world of PACs and 527s. It weakened party leaders, who have to think about building broad national coalitions, and gave power to special interests.

Then came the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision, which managed to make everything even worse. It moved us from a candidate-centric system to a donor-centric system. Donors were unleashed to create their own opaque yet torrential money flows outside both parties and candidates. This created an explosion in the number of groups with veto power over legislation and reform. It polarized politics further because donors tend to be more extreme than politicians or voters. The candidate-centric system empowered special interests; the donor-centric system makes them practically invincible.

Then along came the Supreme Court's McCutcheon decision this week. It has been greeted with cries of horror because it may increase the amount of money in politics. But this is the wrong metric. There will always be money in politics; it's a pipe dream to think otherwise. The crucial question is where is the money flowing.

The McCutcheon decision is a rare win for the parties. It enables party establishments to claw back some of the power that has flowed to donors and "super PACs." It effectively raises the limits on what party establishments can solicit. It gives party leaders the chance to form joint fund-raising committees they can use to marshal large pools of cash and influence. McCutcheon is a small step back toward a party-centric system.

In their book "Better Parties, Better Government," Peter J. Wallison and Joel M. Gora propose the best way to reform campaign finance: eliminate the restrictions on political parties to finance the campaigns of their candidates; loosen the limitations on giving to parties; keep the limits on giving to PACs.

Parties are not perfect, Lord knows. But they have broad national outlooks. They foster coalition thinking. They are relatively transparent. They are accountable to voters. They ally with special interests, but they transcend the influence of any one. Strengthened parties will make races more competitive and democracy more legitimate. Strong parties mobilize volunteers and activists and broaden political participation. Unlike super PACs, parties welcome large numbers of people into the political process.

Since the progressive era, campaign reformers have intuitively distrusted parties. These reformers seem driven by a naïve hope that they can avoid any visible concentration of power. But their approach to reform has manifestly failed. By restricting parties, they just concentrated power in ways that are much worse.

A version of this op-ed appears in print on April 4, 2014, on page A27 of the New York edition with the headline: Party All The Time.