



THE BUYING OF THE PRESIDENT

How Money and the Media Undermine American Democracy

By Charles Lewis

Half a century ago, journalist Joe McGinniss authored *The Selling of the President*, a brilliant exposé about the unabashed marketing of successful 1968 presidential candidate Richard M. Nixon. The image on the book jacket perhaps said it all: the candidate's smiling face emblazoned on a pack of cigarettes.

The extent of the shameless packaging of a national politician, indeed, a former vice president running for the White House, was a revelation to most Americans. It reflected a much darker view of the American presidential election process than had been portrayed in Theodore H. White's iconic series of books, *The Making of the President*.

How quaint that innocence lost appears today. U.S. presidential elections have become garish media spectacles. It is a bazaar of candidates, consultants, pundits, and assorted hucksters that lasts a full two years—half the length of an elected president's term in office. Every four years, the American people endure by far the longest and most expensive election of any nation in the world—until the next one. The 2016 race for the White House is the wildest, most expensive money and media circus ever.

The next president, aided by thousands of paid and unpaid staffers, consultants, volunteers, and incessant expensive advertisements, will have raised and spent an unprecedented sum in the neighborhood of \$1 billion. Most of that money comes from the very wealthiest Americans, a tiny percentage of the overall population. In January 2015, the conservative Republican billionaire brothers Charles and David Koch of Koch Industries and their political allies announced their intention to spend an astonishing \$889 million in the 2016 presidential and congressional elections. That is more than twice what the Koch network spent in 2012; it is about equal to the election spending of the Republican and Democratic parties combined.

◁ Presidential candidate Ted Cruz surrounded by television reporters, Center Barnstead, New Hampshire, Jan. 19, 2016. *Ian Thomas Jansen-Lonnquist/The New York Times/Redux*

According to the *New York Times*, in the first months of the 2016 presidential campaign cycle, 158 families and companies they own or control contributed \$176 million to candidates in both major parties. “Not since before Watergate have so few people and businesses provided so much early money in a campaign,” the *Times* reported. Most of this money was delivered through channels that are now legal thanks to the U.S. Supreme Court’s controversial *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* decision in 2010 that enables unlimited spending in support of campaigns and other political causes by corporations and nonprofits alike.

The \$176 million represented nearly half of all of the “early money” raised in the 2016 presidential election campaign. These donors, the *Times* noted, “are overwhelmingly white, rich, older and male, in a nation that is being remade by the young, by women, and by black and brown voters. Across a sprawling country, they reside in an archipelago of wealth, exclusive neighborhoods dotting a handful of cities and towns.”

The so-called “wealth primary” has become a critical factor in the outcome of presidential elections. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, in every election since the resignation of President Richard M. Nixon in 1974 and the election reform laws that followed, the major party White House candidate who raised the most money the year before any primary or caucus votes had been cast, and been eligible for federal matching funds, became his party’s nominee for the general election. But the post-Watergate reforms about money in politics began to unravel in 2000, when Republican George W. Bush declined to participate in the presidential campaign matching-funds system and his \$100,000-and-up donors also began to blatantly number their campaign checks, so that they and their industry would receive “credit” after the election for the campaign cash contributed. The Democratic Party presidential nominees (in 2004 Senator John Kerry and Barack Obama in 2008) soon thereafter also opted out of the reform system, and the financial floodgates have been wide open ever since.

The bottom line is that the candidate raising the most financial contributions in the year before the actual voting won the nomination of his party every time. The candidate with the most and largest contributions not coincidentally also usually generates the most media advertising, the most corresponding news media coverage “buzz” and public perceptions about the candidate’s “momentum,” and eventually the most votes.

By the end of 2015, the top fundraisers in the 2016 White House race were Democrat Hillary Clinton with \$94 million and Republican Jeb Bush with \$133 million. Clinton, the First Lady during former President Bill Clinton’s two terms in office, a U.S. senator from New York between 2001 and 2009, and secretary of state in the first

Barack Obama administration, correspondingly led her next closest primary opponent, Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, by sixteen percentage points in opinion surveys. However, the declining fortunes of Jeb Bush, the son of the forty-first president and brother of the forty-third president, reflected the exception that proves the rule; although the early frontrunner in mid-2015, as of January 2016 he was polling sixth in a race crowded with more than a dozen major Republican hopefuls.

The commanding ten- to twenty-point lead taken by Republican candidate Donald Trump through most of the second half of 2015 indicates that, whether won through paid organizing and advertising or generated free of charge, media buzz is an essential factor determining the prospects of politicians seeking the American presidency. The pugnacious billionaire businessman and television personality eschewed traditional fundraising and spent relatively little of his own money, around \$6 million, by the end of 2015. At that point, he had hardly paid for any political advertising. Yet his outspoken and often provocative public statements—calling Mexican immigrants criminals and rapists, proposing a ban on Muslims entering the United States, claiming that thousands of New Jersey Muslims cheered the September 11 attacks, debunking the prisoner-of-war heroism of Republican Senator John McCain—enabled Trump to dominate front pages, news broadcasts, and social media feeds for months. The result was massive public attention and a corresponding lead in opinion surveys.

Subverted by Greed

American politics is now a game for the very rich. Candidates seek to buy their ways into office, with campaign donations from wealthy individuals, corporations, and interest groups, or, as in the case of Trump, with personal fortunes and the public platforms such fortunes afford. The relatively picturesque days of “just plain folks” like Abraham Lincoln and Harry S. Truman running for office, winning, and going to Washington are pretty much over. There won’t likely ever be a sequel to Frank Capra’s 1939 movie classic *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*; politics today is more like a Stephen King horror film. Wealthy and powerful interests have hijacked democracy in the United States, in the view of most Americans, according to several recent polls.

According to a *New York Times* survey, 84 percent of Americans think “money has too much influence” in American politics and that “most of the time,” winning candidates specifically help their campaign donors once in office. Many people believe that the increasing cynicism about politics has led to voter disenchantment and disengagement. For example, voter turnout in the 2014 congressional and state elections was the lowest since World War II, just 36.4 percent.

Politics and campaigns have become vastly more expensive. Fewer and fewer folks of modest middle-class means can afford to take a year or two off from their daily lives and mount a robust, well-funded campaign for political office. Eight of the last ten U.S. presidents were millionaires before they were elected, and roughly half of the 535 members of Congress today are millionaires—an irony, given that only about 5 percent of their constituents can claim such wealth.

Who is making by far the most money from this exclusive game? Major media corporations, that's who. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Professor Robert W. McChesney wrote a seminal book in 1999 describing this phenomenon, aptly entitled: *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*. A few years later, in 2003, I had the chance to discuss the problem with former President Jimmy Carter. "I think now the entire election process, including the nomination of candidates, is predicated to a major degree on how much money they can raise," he told me. "And that involves, in most cases, going to special interest groups who hope they can get a favor after the election is over. ... We've not made any progress on the extremely distorting effect of high finance being requisite for any successful candidate. If you look at the list of candidates now that are prominently mentioned for president, almost all of them who have any chance at all are millionaires or multimillionaires. And this is not an accident. An average person like I was, just a peanut farmer back in 1976, you know, we won with practically no money because we campaigned all over the country and built up a grassroots organization. ... I think nowadays that would be absolutely impossible, which means that there's a criterion for success in American politics now—the Democratic or Republican Party—and that is extreme wealth or access to major wealth. And we are the only democratic nation in the world, in the Western world, within which that blight or cancer is affecting our system."

How and why did politics become so ridiculously expensive and exclusive? Carter pointed a finger at the media corporations. "Our political system has been subverted in a very damaging way by the greed, primarily of the news media, television stations, who demand in this country, almost uniquely among great democracies, that candidates have to pay for their presentation of their own campaign platforms and promises through extremely expensive news media. And this is a basic fallacy of our system now," Carter said.

One of the main reasons that presidential campaigns are so expensive is the high cost of television advertising that competing candidates purchase to promote themselves to wide viewerships. Presidents, congressmen, and the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) have been afraid, unable, or unwilling to require the powerful broadcasting and cable television companies to provide free airtime to

political candidates as is the case in most other major democracies—which would lower the cost of campaigns, help to reduce the outsized influence of wealthy donors, and provide a more even-handed platform across the spectrum of candidates.

Bill Clinton momentarily tried to buck the media industry. In his January 1998 State of the Union Address, Clinton, citing the escalating campaign fundraising “arms race” in America, proposed a major new policy initiative to decrease the exorbitant and rising costs of campaign advertisements. “I will formally request that the Federal Communications Commission act to provide free or reduced-cost television time for candidates,” the president said. “The airwaves are a public trust, and broadcasters also have to help us in this effort to strengthen our democracy.” Within twenty-four hours, FCC Chairman William Kennard disclosed that the FCC would develop new rules governing political advertisements. Within days, the multibillion-dollar broadcast corporations and their various sponsored congressional leaders in both political parties shut down this historic proposal; the White House quickly realized that if it did not step back, Congress might penalize the FCC for this perceived impudence and cut its annual budget.

The reform idea has made no progress in all the years since. And little wonder. Between 1996 and late 2000, according to the Center for Public Integrity, the fifty largest media companies (deriving half or more of their revenues from broadcasting, cable operations, publishing, online media, and their content providers) and four of their trade associations spent \$111.3 million to lobby Congress and the executive branch of the government; by 1999 the number of registered, media-related lobbyists had ballooned up to 284 people. And between 1997 and 2000, media corporations took 118 members of Congress and their senior staff on 315 all-expense-paid trips to meet with lobbyists and CEOs to discuss specific legislation and policies favored by their industry.

Reed Hundt, who was the FCC chairman from 1993 to 1997, once told me that he was fascinated by the unique political power that only the media corporations can wield. “The media industry does not mobilize great numbers of voters and it actually is not comprised of America’s largest, economically most important companies,” he said. According to Hundt, the media’s significant clout comes “from its near-ubiquitous, pervasive power to completely alter the beliefs of every American.” Members of Congress and presidential candidates, he said, are afraid to take on the news media directly for fear that they will “disappear” from the TV or radio airwaves and print news columns.

Years later, two campaign finance reformers, Senators John McCain and Russell Feingold, a Republican and a Democrat, respectively, separately told me that media corporations represent the most powerful special interest in Washington. Why?

Because, they noted, the broadcast industry and individual stations and network news organizations decide which politicians will be on the air. For three successive sessions of Congress, they could not get their campaign finance legislation passed with that “free airtime” provision because the broadcasters blocked it by enlisting members of Congress who were presumably also worried about being on the air. The McCain-Feingold campaign finance legislation only passed and became law in the United States after they grudgingly removed this proposed broadcast “free airtime for candidates” regulation.

There was a valiant nonprofit advocacy group, the Alliance for Better Campaigns, founded in 1998 and run by a former *Washington Post* reporter, Paul Taylor; the group’s honorary co-chairmen were former U.S. presidents Gerald R. Ford and Jimmy Carter and former CBS News anchorman Walter Cronkite. Despite the respected people involved, the organization shut down after a few impressive years—the multibillion dollar television broadcast industry and their Congressional leadership allies were simply too powerful to overcome. But according to one of its last, most compelling reports, *Gouging Democracy*, “Local television stations across the country systematically gouged candidates in the closing months of the 2000 campaign, jacking up the prices of their ads ... despite a 30-year-old federal law designed to protect candidates from such demand-driven price spikes.” And between 1980 and 2000 alone, “political advertisers spent five times more on broadcast television ads, even after adjusting for inflation. The candidates made these payments to an industry that has been granted free and exclusive use of tens of billions of dollars worth of publicly owned spectrum space in return for a pledge to serve the public interest.”

Broadcasters are making more revenue than ever on political advertising. Meanwhile, local TV stations—where most Americans get their news—devote only a tiny percentage of their main programming to politics, including interviews with officials and candidates at election time. Stations have a financial disincentive to “give away” airtime when they can make millions by selling it. The average news program sound bite has gone from forty-four seconds more than forty years ago to less than ten seconds today.

Deepening Disillusionment

Beyond the broadcasters’ substantial power and largely unregulated greed, so many other developments have diminished Americans’ perceptions of politicians, public relations, advertising, and the news media. Trust in the U.S. government is at near-record lows, following decades of scandals from lies about the Vietnam War, the Watergate cover-up, the Monica Lewinski affair, and deception justifying the invasion of Iraq. Congress has the highest disapproval rating recorded in forty-one years

of public opinion tracking by the Gallup polling organization—86 percent. Trust in the news media is not faring much better; only four in ten Americans have “a great deal” or “a fair amount of trust and confidence” in the media to report the news “fully, accurately, and fairly.” If Americans fully understood the extent to which U.S. media companies directly profit from the political process, the level of trust would probably be even lower.

A half-century after the *The Selling of the President*, America now has more than four times more public relations specialists than professional journalists; in 1960 the ratio of journalists to flacks was one to one. According to the *Columbia Journalism Review* and researchers at Cardiff University and the University of Technology in Sydney, 50 percent of news content in some American, British, and Australian news outlets was directly derived from press releases. Over the same period, annual spending on advertising in newspapers, magazines, radio, and television in the U.S. has skyrocketed from \$12 billion to more than \$150 billion, twice the rate of inflation. While as late as the early 1990s only about 2 percent of total TV advertising revenues was from political commercials, today political advertising accounts for more than 20 percent.

In his successful 1968 presidential campaign, Nixon raised \$25.4 million, and spent \$6.3 million of it on television advertising; forty years later, freshman Illinois U.S. Senator Barack Obama’s 2008 successful presidential campaign raised \$750 million, nearly five times that amount (adjusted for inflation), and \$280 million of it was spent on TV advertising. Disillusionment with the money and media circus seems likely to deepen. In the 2016 election cycle, spending on political television advertising is projected to reach at least \$4.4 billion for federal races alone, up from \$3.8 billion in 2012. But, have no doubt, it will be the broadcasters’ best year ever.