Campaign Finance Reform: An Ecological Economics Approach

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PPUA 5260: Ecological Economics

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April 11, 2022

Introduction

For decades, the wealthy elite have utilized their economic bargaining power to manipulate United States state and federal legislation in their own best interests at the expense of the American public (Reuss, 2020). Today, the largest special interest lobbyist groups and Political Action Committees (PACs) are largely composed of the chief coalitions of corporate superpowers; they wield their economic prowess to puppeteer the congressional officials that they helped to elect in order to further maximize their profit and accumulate greater and greater sums of wealth (U.S. Committee on the Judiciary, 2012). This leads to the formation of a seemingly never ending cycle in which large corporations lobby for policies that will specifically benefit them, which, in turn, allows them to continually increase the earnings that they can then employ to fund the next round of elected officials at their disposal. This self-fulfilling prophecy poses social and climate justice concerns in which elected officials are obliged to the donors that secured their position of power rather than the hundreds of thousands of American constituents who depend on them to ensure their highest quality of life. This case study aims to investigate the relationship between a lack of climate action progress in the past three decades and campaign finance policies that fail to address issues of political corruption within the U.S. federal government from a solutions-based ecological economics framework.

The Ferocity of the Campaign Corruption Conundrum

American mega donors, such as Sheldon & Miriam O. Adelson, Timothy Mellon, and Michael R. Bloomberg, are largely responsible for the funding of nearly 7.5% of all 2020 campaign contributions (Biggest Donors, 2022). “Dark money,” or donations from Super PACs and 501(c) organizations, are not legally obligated to disclose the specifics of their donors and are practically untraceable by the American public. This is an example of a way in which special interest groups can bypass the current campaign finance constraints in order to position people more likely to further their political and economic agendas in appointed seats of government (U.S. Committee on the Judiciary, 2012). Campaign financing and lobbying are issues that, unfortunately, largely benefit candidates on both sides of the aisle, with both Joe Biden and Donald Trump raising $1.69 billion and $1.96 billion respectfully in just the 2020 election cycle alone (McMinn, 2020); therefore, these are instances of corruption that are uniquely difficult to reform due to bipartisan pushback. After all, what government official would consciously legislate for reform policies that proactively reduce their profit earning potential? That being said, it is essential to any realization of social and climate justice that there be remediation to current campaign finance operations that ensure the prioritization of people and the planet over profit (Alston, 2019). The objectives of ecological economics will supply the framework from which to evaluate the efficacy of the campaign finance reform solutions described in this case study from both an economic *and* environmental standpoint.

Non-Negotiables of Successful Campaign Finance Reform

A 1990 court ruling in Austin v. Michigan State Chamber of Commerce declared the prohibition of corporations spending to influence elections constitutional, stating: "the corrosive and distorting effects of immense aggregations of wealth that are accumulated with the help of the corporate form and that have little or no correlation to the public's support for the corporation's political ideas." This ruling was famously overturned in the 2010 case Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission. Here, after examining the Austin ruling, the Supreme Court determined that "[a]ll speakers…use money amassed from the economic marketplace to fund their speech, and the First Amendment protects the resulting speech" (Citizens United, n.d.). This ruling created the "dark money loophole," where non profit organizations are allowed to receive and spend as they please without disclosing details. Since then, corporations have donated in excess of one-billion dollars toward election funds, including advertisements that directly attack political opposition (Lee, 2016). Nonetheless, a policy to control political spending would necessitate the termination of this loophole. We propose a policy in which all non profit corporations are required to make their donor funding public information. With this provision in place, the public will have access to the names of the people who are trying to influence their votes during elections and supply them with the necessary data in which to make informed decisions on election day.

The Ecological Efficacy of this Campaign Reform Policy Solution

Many of the nation's top donors are also its biggest polluters; by keeping their donations nondisclosed, they are exploiting our current economic system. Our policy is geared toward the shift to ecological economics, an intersectional and transdisciplinary field of study that describes the economic system as only a part of a greater social system that is within the larger ecological system and "offers viable alternatives to the theoretical foundations and policy recommendations of neoclassical welfare economics" (Growdy, 2003). This with a goal "to develop a deeper scientific understanding of the complex linkages between humans and the rest of nature, and to use that understanding to develop policies that will lead to a world which is ecologically sustainable, has a fair distribution of resources, and efficiently allocate scarce resources including 'natural' and 'social' capital" (Costanza, 2008). By eliminating the "dark money loophole," voters will be able to make more informed decisions; a candidate who preaches green policies but accepts money from fossil fuel or other such corporations will no longer have the option of keeping their activities a secret. The proposed policy would go into effect on January 1, 2023, by which time all non-for-profit corporations will have six months to produce a complete account of their donor base and political expenditures. Furthermore, Super PACs and 501(c) non profit organizations that fail to adhere to this standard of transparency will, on first offense, be prohibited from engaging in any form of campaign contributions for the entire calendar year with the consequences of their actions increasing to a three year expulsion upon second offense and permanent ban from all local, state, and federal election-related donations barring a third behavioral offense. This policy solution aims to expose the side door entrance that allows lobbyists to slip multi-million dollar campaign contributions through the cracks undetected and force dishonest donors to take the front entrance and adhere to the established financial restrictions that have been put in place to limit the bargaining powers of the American oligarchs.

Conclusion

The political corruption phenomenon in which elected officials are no longer advocating for the welfare of their constituents, but instead, in the interests of their largest donors that they are indebted to is the fatal flaw of the contemporary American governing body. The “dark money loophole” has been exploited to deepen the pockets of the uber wealthy for far too long and revolutionary policy reform is necessary. Grassroots-supported progressive campaigns like that of Illhan Omar, Cory Booker, and Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez that refuse PAC-funding and corporate campaign donations are few and far between, but a step in the right direction nonetheless. Policy reform in which we permanently seal this abused loophole mechanism is an essential short-term solution while larger-scale campaign finance reform solutions are negotiated. The proposed campaign finance reform policy solution would address the issue of transparency during election campaigns and increase awareness around the inadequacy of the current system to effectively provide for its constituents.

Domestic policies that allow for major polluters to maintain strong influence over social and environmental legislation create a dynamic in which advancing aggressive climate action is practically impossible to achieve. The ecological economics framework illustrates the antiquated nature of neoclassical economics and the downfalls of the contemporary approach to the climate crisis. The new economic perspective demands that environmental factors be at the forefront of all economic considerations and is a brilliant grounding principle in attempting to tip the scale back towards ecological advocacy. This necessary element of legislative reform is long overdue and will function to educate the broad public on the true financial events occurring behind the scenes, granting the American people the power to utilize their right to vote in order to fight back and express their desire for change. With the increasing frequency and severity of extreme weather events, emissions pollution threatening mankind's ability to access clean air and water, and regions of the globe becoming uninhabitable to human life, it is time for urgent climate action that works to promote the health of the public and protect the future of the planet, and better yet, a governing body that is compatible with these efforts (Kennedy, 2022).

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