

Real Money: Money and the integrity of the political process

By Rob Rikoon | For The New Mexican

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People say that money and democracy don't mix well, and history supports that conclusion. As far as I can see, in 2012, money *is* politics. Whoever comes away with the White House today, one thing is for sure: The American people did not get to exercise their full right to choose who will lead them over the next two- and four-year periods. Congress has never been held in lower esteem by a great majority of voters and for good reason. The office of the president retains its stature on the world stage but is much diminished in its practical power. This is due to the pervasive and negative influence that money has on our electoral system. One result of this perverse twisting of our nation's founding principles is that the real economy is hobbled by a lack of confidence in the future.

Over the last 50 years, the advent of electronic media has impacted the electoral and legislative process so much so that public relations, rather than substance, rules most venues that we, the public, get to see. It is all the more frightening to see what takes place behind the closed doors of Washington, D.C., where the real negotiations between the Oval Office and Capitol Hill occur. The financial economy, i.e. Wall Street and its beneficiaries, receive the most reward from this privilege-driven system.

Influence peddlers who exist on both sides of every issue, working on behalf of powerful players who have money to spend in the "right" places, get their way more often than not at great expense to the public well-being, particularly in the health care industry. These well-placed lobbyists' influence is increasing, as various single-issue factions focus on winning elections at any cost and then influencing elected official policies. How can we, the citizenry, put the brakes on this deteriorating situation?

The simple answers to this problem are known and would be easy if voters had some way to go outside the present system to express and effect their desire to reset the democratic process back to "of the people, by the people and for the people." I submit that this next administration be judged by whether or not it reforms the basic way that business is done in the legislature and executive branches of government. Campaign finance reform that limits the amount of money spent on advertising might allow truly varied approaches and potentially creative ideas to finally be heard over the current din of the Democratic and Republican Party machines.

Term limits are another way to keep entrenched professional politicians and special relationships from overriding the public's interests. The pressure to satisfy donors is ever present when re-election campaigning is always on the horizon. A second term president is the only limit now in our system — this needs to change. People who hold political office should be prohibited from crossing over the line to receive money from anyone related to their functions as public servants after their service period is ended.

Presently, politicians look forward and often receive fat salaries and contracts due to their continued involvement in and influence on matters they dealt with during their tenure as elected officials. This is wrong and markedly reduces the integrity level of our political process. People who run for office and those around them are just regular people presented with special opportunities, and the largess and inordinately high compensation for minimal work that gets thrown their way later would be hard for any of us to ignore.

As always, it is the common person who suffers from the status quo. How might voters go outside the current cumbersome and co-opted process to get real change in the methods by which our democracy runs? Making voter registration easier, rather than more difficult, is one way.

This is exactly opposite from the way things seems to be going, as highly organized factions who want to reduce the voting population are pushing for a higher level of documentation and voter ID proof. What a travesty of the American Way. People should be allowed to register to vote when they go to the DMV, file their taxes, or answer any government census request.

Why not change Voting Day from the first Tuesday to the first weekend of November. That way, the 50 percent plus of registered voters who don't normally have the time or energy to vote, due to work, school or childcare responsibilities on weekdays, could participate in elections.

Another possibly way to get around our current dependency on politics as usual is to institute some kind of direct referendum process where issues that relate to the public well being can get put to a popular vote via electronic means. The ancient "plebiscite" format called for citizens to gather and cast their votes directly, not through elected representatives who were subject to tawdry behavior and the corruption that comes along naturally with "power."

Given the wide dispersion of technology, especially cell phones, it seems that some direct connection could be made on a regular basis whereby simple propositions could be put forth and debated without money running the show.

The "fiscal cliff" we face over the next several months will be a case study in how badly the current system is failing us as a nation. Understandably, no one individual wants to stand up and take the heat for advocating making the obviously necessary spending cuts and increase in some people and company taxes.

Maybe our nation's factions will unite in a grand compromise, but if not, voters need to take back power from their representatives as continued inaction by Congress will result in a deteriorating economic outlook. That is not a good result for anyone, no matter what their political party persuasion!

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