

# Are We Witnessing the Death of Representative Democracy?

**Billionaires now sponsor presidential candidates (or run for president themselves) the way Renaissance popes and princes once patronized artists.**



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The following is an excerpt from the book **Down for the Count** by Andrew Gumbel (The New Press, 2016) :

*"Imagine a political system in which votes are bought and sold freely in the open market, a system in which it is taken for granted that people will buy all the votes they can afford and use their power to get more money in order to buy more votes, so that a single magnate might easily outvote a whole city. Imagine a situation in which elections have become a mere formality because one or a few individuals are owners of a controlling number of votes. Suppose that nine-tenths of the members of the community are unable to exert any appreciable influence. Suppose, moreover, that the minority is entitled to very little information about what is being done. That is what the political system would be like if it were run the way business is run." — E.E. Schattschneider*

Does representative democracy have a future, or is it just a phase we've been going through? If by "representative democracy" we mean a system in which a majority of voters holds meaningful sway over policy outcomes, the game in the United States may already be over.

The corrupting influence of money hasn't just upended the priorities of elected officials, who now spend more time raising funds than talking to constituents or researching the issues they vote on. It hasn't just made campaigns more expensive, more media-saturated, and more vicious. The scenario that Schattschneider imagined in 1960 has largely come to pass. Magnates *do* outvote entire cities, at least in those cases—the majority—where media coverage of political campaigns cannot keep up with the relentless flow of money. For many people living in noncompetitive or uncontested districts, elections have indeed become just a formality. Billionaires now sponsor presidential candidates (or run for president themselves) the way Renaissance popes and princes once patronized artists; where those candidates previously had to sway party committees and state delegates to become viable office seekers, now they need to win over an audience of just one. As the *Wall Street Journal* observed of the record crop of billionaire-backed Republican candidates for 2016, "The life of their candidacies is now divorced from their ability to directly raise money from voters." Whether

money alone can translate into electoral success remains to be seen, but it can certainly catapult presidential candidates over the first hurdle and into the public limelight.

Jimmy Carter has described the United States as an oligarchy, and a widely publicized academic study published in 2014 went a long way toward backing him up.

*“Our analyses suggest that majorities of the American public actually have little influence over the policies our government adopts,”* the political scientists Martin Gilens of Princeton and Benjamin Page of Northwestern wrote. *“Americans do enjoy many features central to democratic governance, such as regular elections, freedom of speech and association, and a widespread (if still contested) franchise. But . . . if policymaking is dominated by powerful business organizations and a small number of affluent Americans, then America’s claims to being a democratic society are seriously threatened.”*

Journalists like to divide billionaires involved in American politics into simple categories of good and bad, depending on the point of view. Tom Steyer, the San Francisco hedge fund manager, is good if you’re an environmentalist, bad if you think global warming is a hoax. Charles and David Koch, the Wichita industrialists and energy magnates, are good if you’re a Tea Party Republican, brother devils incarnate if you’re a liberal. That coverage, however, is misleading, because the very rich really are different from you and me. Another recent study comparing the political views of America’s top 1 percent with the electorate as a whole found the billionaire class to be far less committed to excellence in public school education (35 percent against 87 percent of all Americans), less committed to public-sector job creation, less committed to providing viable benefits to the unemployed, and less interested in increasing taxes to support universal health care—or for any other purpose. In short, they skew significantly to the right of the average voter and are generally skeptical about the public sector’s power to generate jobs and beneficial social change. They favor tax cuts over programs for the poor, and deficit reduction over government stimulus plans.

At the same time, the super-rich are far more active politically than most of us, taking full advantage of their wealth to contribute to campaigns and to enjoy the access that their money grants. Two-thirds of the top thousand campaign donors in the 2012 cycle favored Republicans, as one would expect given their overall political profile. Financial services was the sector that gave the most—helping to explain why both parties backed away from aggressive Wall Street reform in the wake of the 2008 economic collapse, despite overwhelming public support, and why the Justice Department under Obama failed to prosecute a single top financial executive. Of those thousand top donors (making personal contributions of at least \$134,000 each), 40 percent said they had contacted a U.S. senator, 37 percent a member of the House of Representatives, 21 percent a regulatory official, 14 percent someone in the executive branch, and 12 percent a White House official. Most Americans can barely name their representatives, much less recall chatting with them.

The way billionaires wield influence is rarely as crude and sinister as huddling with elected officials over cigars in some darkened room and plotting ways to subvert the public interest. It’s about access and the flow of information. Long before *Citizens United* launched the money aspect of politics into the stratosphere, the one-term Georgia senator Wyche Fowler explained the basic problem.

*“The brutal fact that we all agonize over,”* he said in the early 1990s, *“is that if you get two calls and one is from a constituent who wants to complain about the VA mistreating her father, for the 10th time, and one is from somebody who is going to give you a party and raise \$10,000, you call back the contributor. . . . There’s no way to justify it. Except*

*that you rationalize that you have to have money or you can't campaign. You're not in the game."*

Nowadays, of course, it's unlikely that an ordinary constituent would get through to a senator even once, much less ten times. And, in a world where the Koch brothers are planning to raise almost \$1 billion for the 2016 election cycle, \$10,000 would barely buy a plate at a fund-raising dinner. Still, being *in the game* is what continues to drive American politics. Elected officials can disregard the public clamor for strict regulation of the derivatives market and still be in the game. But they can't turn their back on their Wall Street contributors and say the same thing.

*"The central point that emerges from our research is that economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy," Gilens and Page wrote, "while mass-based interest groups and average citizens have little or no independent influence."*

The same imbalance of access and outcomes applies to longer-standing lobbying groups with specific policy interests, like the National Rifle Association (NRA) or the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). These groups don't just lobby for a particular point of view on domestic or foreign affairs; they use their campaign spending as leverage to close down debate before it can even begin. Congressional members aren't just afraid of losing their NRA or AIPAC funding if they step too far from the approved line—they are also afraid of how relentlessly these groups might back their opponents and flood the airwaves with negative advertising. The consequence is that the Israeli government endures a fraction of the scrutiny in Washington that it does at home, and even modest gun safety measures with broad popular support do not make it through Congress, no matter how many senseless mass shootings hit the headlines. One does not have to be a critic of Israel or of the NRA's tireless advocacy on behalf of gun manufacturers to see that taking issues off the table in advance and demonizing even the suggestion of discussing them is not a democratic way of conducting public business.

Schattschneider argued that the genius of the American system, at its founding, was that it broke the monopoly stranglehold that economic elites had held over politics for much of the history of Western civilization and opened society up to vigorous competition between the economic and the political spheres. More conservative political theorists like to argue that capitalism and democracy are two sides of the same coin—that what benefits one will inevitably benefit the other. But Schattschneider took a different tack, one that went against Louis Hartz and other thinkers of his time but perhaps resonates more in our post-*Citizens United* world. "The public interest resides in the no man's land between government and business," Schattschneider wrote.

*"The public likes competitive power systems. It wants both democracy and a high standard of living and thinks it can have both provided it can maintain a dynamic equilibrium between the democratic and capitalist elements."*

America has now lost that equilibrium and is in danger of being unable to recover it. Another political theorist from the baby boom years, Seymour Martin Lipset, wrote a famous paper arguing that middle-class stability, not just overall prosperity, was essential to a successful democracy. Wealth inequality was poison, he said, because it ate at the very core of that achievement:

*"A society divided between a large impoverished mass and a small favored elite would result either in oligarchy . . . or tyranny."*

The flood of corporate money that has taken over American politics since the Supreme Court's *Buckley v. Valeo* ruling in 1976 has coincided with a dramatic and continuing spike in exactly the kind of inequality that Lipset was talking about. The top 1 percent of Americans bring in more than 20 percent of the country's overall income, while the bottom 90 percent bring in less than 50 percent—a disparity unmatched even at the height of the Gilded Age. Between 1979 and 2012, the income of the top fifth of the population increased 48.8 percent in real terms, while the bottom fifth saw a 12.1 percent drop. Every income group except for the top 20 percent has lost ground in the last forty years, regardless of whether the economy has boomed or tanked and regardless, too, of which party has held the presidency or controlled Congress. The gap between rich and poor stopped widening briefly in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, only to start growing again with a vengeance, with the top 1 percent snagging more than 90 percent of new income in 2010.

How does this inequality affect political outcomes? How could it not? One recent econometric study found a direct correlation between the political activity of the super-rich and government commitment to quality public education, which billionaires tend to mistrust; conversely, countries with a greater commitment to public education see broader participation in politics across social classes. In other words, the more billionaires influence the political process, the more they are likely to continue influencing it, because the broader electorate can only become more disengaged and ill-informed as a result of the policies they espouse.

The problem can only get worse in a more globalized economy where capital has become mobile in ways that classical economists like Adam Smith and David Ricardo never envisaged. Multinational corporations are far more powerful now than they were in the era of the original robber barons because they have the power to bankroll politicians as long as they remain useful and to close down factories and move investments and jobs overseas if they do not. The history of democracy has been largely a history of the empowerment of the working class, but now we live in a world where much of that working class lives in another country, working in sweatshop conditions for minimal wages, with no voice whatsoever in our electoral process—or, often, their own. Where once industry stayed put and could be regulated, now, to a large extent, it regulates *us*.

That said, the mass electorate in the United States has hardly laid down and died. The 2008 Obama campaign showed that an insurgent candidate with charisma, the right message, and the right digital strategy can still mobilize a vast number of people. The 2016 campaign, meanwhile, has revealed an extraordinary anti-establishment populism in both parties. The Internet and social media have changed the landscape of political activism more generally, and while it is too soon to say how effective they can be as a mechanism for countering the power of special-interest lobbyists over the long term, there are certainly promising signs. In 2014, the debate over net neutrality—the question of whether telecoms companies can create a tiered system of Internet access to enhance their own profitability at the expense of less powerful online players—was upended in startling fashion after John Oliver roused his audience to action in a segment on the HBO show *Last Week Tonight* and embarrassed the *Federal Communications Commission* into distancing itself from the corporate lobbyists—including a number of former *FCC* commissioners working for companies they once regulated. Obama himself urged the young audience of *The Daily Show*, Oliver's alma mater on Comedy Central, to get involved in issues they cared about and not be daunted by

*“the money . . . the filters and all the polarization” in contemporary politics. “It doesn't take that much, I guarantee you,” he said on the show in 2015. “If people are engaged, eventually the political system responds. Despite the money, despite the lobbyists, it responds.”*

The barriers to sustained, grassroots involvement remain daunting, however, especially the sort of high-minded, fact-driven involvement Obama had in mind. Study after study has shown that the American public in general is dismally ill-informed, and that those who watch Fox News, the Republican Party's echo chamber and frequent outrage machine, not only learn nothing but actually become *less* informed the more they watch. A particularly depressing University of Colorado study in 2012 demonstrated that voters will continue to express strong opinions about lightning-rod issues like health care reform or merit pay for teachers—the sort that Fox pundits love to feast on—even after they try and fail to articulate what the substance of those issues are. In other words, the less voters and grassroots political activists know, the more they think they know. That helps explain the surface allure of Donald Trump's presidential campaign, say, but it's not a strong premise for mass political participation in anything.

The odds of progressive reform in the electoral arena are similarly steep, and for many of the same reasons. The system makes life so comfortable for incumbents they have little motivation to press for change. Many eligible voters are too disaffected to care, while a noisy minority of partisan activists—on both sides of the political aisle—prefers to resort to knee-jerk theories about cheating by the other side, with or without actual evidence, than to come together to demand a fairer system. One potential bright spot is Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign, which has placed voting rights front and center, especially with African American audiences whom she needs to keep fired up if she wants to repeat Obama's victories in Florida, Virginia, and North Carolina. Among Clinton's policy prescriptions are automatic voter registration nationwide, an expansion of early voting, and a repeal of lifetime voting bans on ex-felons—all solid ideas, if they ever came to fruition. Unfortunately, the prevailing view in Washington is that election management should be left up to individual states, and while that's an obstinate and irrational position given the failure of many states to police themselves to a standard worthy of the country's democratic ideals, it's unclear what even a sitting president could do to change it. It certainly does no harm that Clinton is throwing down the gauntlet to her Republican rivals and asking, "What part of democracy don't they understand?" But, for now, it's little more than campaign grandstanding.

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Andrew Gumbel has worked as a foreign correspondent in Europe, the Middle East and the US and is the author of several books, including *Oklahoma City: What The Investigation Missed – And Why It Still Matters*, and his latest, [Down for the Count: Dirty Elections and the Rotten History of Democracy in America](#)