

# An Essay on the Rationalization of Politics<sup>1</sup>

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In an ideal democracy political power is shared by all citizens equally. But today's nations are too large and complex for direct participation by everyone, making elected "representative" government the established norm in the industrial west. One of the major difficulties with modern representative democracy is the apathy or indifference of its citizens. Since the 1960s, there has been a decline in voter turnout for national elections. Today, only about 60 to 70 percent of registered voters actually participate in presidential elections, and voter turnout for state and local elections is much smaller. And because many voters never register, these figures actually overestimate the extent of citizen involvement in the political process. To illustrate the lack of citizen involvement suppose there are 100 eligible voters for a presidential election (n=100):

Of these, 70 percent actually register to vote (n=70).

Of these, 70 percent actually go to the voting booth (n=49).

Of these, 70 percent vote Republican (n=29).

The 49 people who actually vote are not a random sample of the population--studies of actual voters reveal that people with higher education and income levels are much more likely to participate. The hypothetical 29 people out of a possible 100 have given the Democratic Party a huge "mandate" to rule in the name of the "majority" of the "people." (Increasingly a mandate is being defined by political commentators as anything over 51 percent of the vote.) The goal of political campaigns is to win this political mandate, that is, to win elections. The

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goal of the citizen is to influence elected officials to support their interests and values in government legislation and decision making. The relentless pursuit of these goals on the part of both candidates and the electorate, often at “all costs,” has taken us a long way from our civic book lessons. The ever more efficient steps to achieve these two narrow goals, money to run expensive campaigns and political influence for those outside of government, have overwhelmed all other considerations--personal ethics, values, and beliefs on the part of politicians and their managers, as well as the broader social values of democracy itself.

### **The Rise of Money**

Of course money has long been central to American politics. Theodore Roosevelt spent \$2.5 million on his presidential campaign in 1904, with about three-quarters of the money coming from corporate America (Harwood, 1997). But the role of money has grown. In 1996 the spending on the presidential election reached about \$1 billion. The ability to raise large sums of money and run campaigns based on massive television advertising have become the theme of the modern political campaign. In 1996 estimates are that total spending for all elections in the US exceeded \$3 billion (The Economist, 1997), though some place it closer to \$4 billion (Harwood, 1997). Elections for the US House and Senate alone was at least \$660 million in 1996 (this without the \$30m that Michael Huffington spent pursuing a Senate seat in 1994). The average Senate campaign now cost about \$4.5 million. In order to pay for their campaigns, it is estimated that every senator must raise about \$14,000 every week of their six year term (The Economist, 1997). The pursuit of money on the part of politicians to pay for the expensive advertising has completely distorted representative democracy.

In the United States legislators and officials of the executive branch are influenced by groups with a particular stake in legislation. These groups include physicians, insurance

companies, realtors, oil companies, and numerous other groups. Etzioni (1984) defines these as "special interest groups, " or SIGs, because their social base is relatively narrow, entry into the group is restricted, and they are usually concerned about laws and policies that affect the exclusive economic interests of the group itself. Often focused on narrow issues such as sugar subsidies or oil pricing that can be worth billions to the members of these special interests, it is SIGs that pump the obscene amounts of money into the political campaigns.

There are a number of ways that SIGs can contribute to political campaigns. An individual's contribution is limited to \$2,000. Political Action Committees (PACs) are set up by interest groups to contribute to political. There are now about 4,000 PACs, and they contribute about one-third of all campaign money--the vast majority of this money coming from special interests representing business, professional organizations, or labor (Etzioni, 1984; The Economist, 1996). PAC money contributed directly to a candidate must be reported, and there are limits of \$5,000 per candidate (an additional \$5,000 can be given in primaries). But there are additional ways to get money to the candidates that interest groups favor.

Interest groups encourage their member organizations to get their senior management to contribute directly to candidates. The donations from one organizations management team can easily top a PAC donation. Another method is for the interest group to stage fundraisers or receptions for candidates in their home districts--thereby raising money for favored politicians while staying under the legal limits for direct donations. Also, unlimited funds can legally be given by PACs and individuals as "soft money," which is given to political parties for "grass-roots party building." These funds often find their way into the campaign coffers of candidates. Still another outlet for unlimited funds are called "independent" money for such things as "issue advocacy" ads. As long as these ads are not formally coordinated with a candidates campaign,

and makes no mention of the name of the candidate, they are not subject to either legal limits or reporting.

Of course, the money is not spread around to all politicians equally. Special interest groups and their lobbyists focus on key legislators to represent their views. Hudson (1996) quotes Tom Scully, CEO for the American Federation of Health Systems, on this point: “There are about 20 major players who decide hospitals’ fates. We pick out 10 to 12 that we work with the most and make sure all their local hospital people know them” (p. 5).

As a result of all this money, many critics claim, we have the best congress that money can buy. Elected representatives argue that the money does not buy votes, it simply goes to legislators who happen to believe in the same issues and causes as the special interest group. While it is true that a “quid pro quo” relationship cannot be proved, the circumstantial evidence that special interests are buying the votes of our elected officials is substantial. At the very least, the litany of special interest money in our politics demonstrates that the present system encourages the election of officials who represent the interests of powerful organizations. So, taking their claims at face value, what sorts of representation do special interest groups get for their campaign and soft money contributions? And, perhaps more importantly, what sorts of representation do the rest of us receive?

- From 1992 through 1994 pro-environment advocates gave \$2 million in national political contributions, PACs opposed to environmental regulation gave 24 million (Breslow et al, 1996).
- In 1994 The Health Insurance Association of America ran a soft money advertising campaign directly against President Clinton's Health Care Reform proposal. The "Harry and Louise" advertising blitz is widely credited with undermining support for the president's proposal--

and setting the stage for the insurance industry's takeover of health care along similar "managed-care" (albeit corporate instead of government) lines.

- Between 1985 and 1995 physicians and the health insurance industry have contributed some \$49 million to congressional campaigns and soft money accounts (Breslow et al, 1996). The focus now is on trying to influence federal restructuring of Medicare and Medicaid so that physicians, hospitals, insurance companies, and other health care organizations will not be hurt (Hudson, 1996; Breslow et al, 1996).
- Since the end of the cold war, the B-2 stealth bomber has been a plane without a military mission. Even the Air Force refused to request any more planes, and Clinton did not include it in the 1997 budget. Northrup Grumman along with five subcontractors on the B-2 contributed some \$2.2 million to federal candidates in 1993-94. Congress added \$493 million for the bomber (Breslow et al, 1996).
- The National Association of Broadcasters, a lobby representing the television industry, contributed more than \$800,000 in campaign contributions in the 1996 election. At the same time the top 75 media markets sold \$400 million in political ads in the campaign (Jenkins, 1997).
- Big Sugar made some \$1.8 million in PAC contributions to federal candidates in 1993-94. In return, like-minded congressmen continue price supports worth millions to the sugar industry (Breslow et al, 1996).

### **The Rise of Factionalism**

Two other types of interest groups combine with SIGs to present a somewhat different problem for democracy--that of factionalism in government. The single-issue group comes together because of their feelings about specific issues such as gun control, abortion, or the death penalty.

Finally, there are the relatively new phenomena of broad based organizations such as the American Association of Retired People or Common Cause. Etzioni (1984) labels these groups as “constituency-representing organizations,” or CROs. They differ from SIGs in that their social base is relatively broad, and they often encompass non-monetary interests (such as values, or social status). While CROs and single interest groups use money to further their ends with the political class, they are not usually in the same money league with SIGs. To be successful, CROs and single interest groups must also be able to motivate their mass membership to contribute small sums of money for its lobbying activity and most especially, to vote in accordance with the issues of the group. The size of the group, its degree of organization, and the money at its disposal are key in determining the amount of influence the group has over the political process.

Trying to influence state legislators and the members of the US Congress is the principal activity of all interest groups. Most such groups have professional lobbyists (full or part-time, depending on the size and power of the group) who try to convince law-makers to pass legislation that the group desires--or oppose legislation that the group consider counter to their interests. One of the tools of the lobbyists is to provide information (from the interest group’s perspective) on legislative proposals of interest to the group. Since government has grown so complex, the information provided by a lobby can be crucial in swaying a legislator’s vote. In addition, lobbyists cultivate friendships and throw lavish parties in their attempts to influence the legislative process. Promises of political support (or threats of opposition) from interest groups with large memberships can also be effective if the organization can actually deliver on these promises and mobilize their members to vote and work for particular candidates.

The number of lobbyists and the number of organized interest groups has grown dramatically in recent years.

There are two reasons for the growth in the number and power of interest groups in the United States. First is the growth in the technology of group organization and communication. Since the 1960s there has been an explosion of technologies such as personal computers, fax machines, e-mail, list-serves, cellular phones, and newsletters. This communications technology has been augmented by the proliferation of digitized information in the form of magazine, charity and political mailing lists, census data, financial information, and questionnaire data that, along with powerful computer software, allow interest groups to recruit, propagandize, coordinate and mobilize the actions of their members across the country.

Interest group generated protests are becoming more both more efficient and more subtle in their technique. The Christian Coalition, for example, has developed "Hypotenuse," a rather sophisticated method of generating the needed constituent anger.

Executive director Randy Tate records a request to his membership, usually about the need to pass or defeat legislation. Hypotenuse then sends the audio message, along with a digitized call sheet, via modem to personal computers around the nation. Those PCs, in turn, dial the preselected coalition leaders, deliver Tate's message, and thus spawn a wave of letter writing and phone dialing from thousands of people who have already been trained in political action (Birnbaum, 1997, p. 148).

Birnbaum also reports on grass-roots generating innovations involving the use of the web. One site dedicated to global warming that opposes mandatory cutbacks provides "predrafted E-mails from farmers, senior citizens, and small-business owners that read as if they were self-composed and can be launched directly to congressional representatives with the click of a mouse" (p.149).

Whenever Congress or a state legislature threatens the interest of the group, the special interest

organization sounds the alarm through its communications network, bringing a flood of phone calls, faxes, letters and petitions to the offending legislators.

A second reason for the growth in the number of interest groups is the proliferation of government policies and programs that have a direct impact on the economic well-being of an increasing number of people. Until recently, lobbying was done mainly on the behalf of large moneyed interests. Now, it has spread to the middle classes as well. Interest groups now include such groups as the National Taxpayers' Union, the American Association of Sex Educators, the Possum Growers and Breeders Association, the American Association of Retired People, the National Rifle Association, and the Beer Drinkers of America. All of these groups use lobbyists, campaign monies, and votes to influence legislators to allocate government resources--most notably in the form of taxbreaks and resisting cuts in favored programs--according to their interests.

Jonathan Rauch (1994) maintains the proliferation of new interest groups are causing "demosclerosis," clogging the arteries of government and preventing it from controlling its own budget, solving new problems, or adapting to economic change. While the CROs and single interest groups are not nearly as powerful as the corporate and professional special interests (and one could argue that they tend to be somewhat more representative in their make-up), all of them combined do have a paralyzing effect on government. Propose a national health policy and the medical insurance industry pays for a fatal multimedia campaign; propose an energy tax to encourage conservation and help the deficit, and the Energy Tax Policy Alliance fights you tooth and nail; suggest cutting the business lunch deduction from 80 percent to 50 percent and the National Restaurant Association will mobilize to kill it . In a Time cover story on "Hyper democracy" Robert Wright (1995) summed up the irrationality factor of interest group politics:

It means that the corruption of the public interest by special interests is no easily cured pathology, but a stubbornly rational pattern of behavior. The costs of each groups selfishness are spread across the whole nation while the benefits are captured by the group. Though every group might prosper in the long run if all groups surrendered just enough to balance the budget, it makes no sense for any of them to surrender unilaterally (p. 5).

The rationalization of politics as exhibited by the proliferation of interest groups is counter to the national interest itself. Rational action in pursuit of the narrow goals of the organization often leads the organization to undermine the foundations of the system itself.

So it would seem that the rationalization of politics runs counter to the interests of the entire political system. Interest groups (and their money) undermine the geographical basis for representative government and substitute representation of moneyed interests in its place. This is no small matter. In a democracy, everyone is supposed to have equal access to the ear of government, but, to quote the pigs of *Animal Farm*, “some are more equal than others.” Who does a congressman from west Kentucky represent on the floor of the House when he gets hundreds of thousands of dollars from the Savings and Loan industry to run for the seat in his district? How is a Senator to reconcile any conflicts between the interests of her constituents and the interests of the National Education Association when she relies on NEA money and volunteers to win her next election? Our elected officials, in Washington as well as those at the state level, are trapped in a system where they must be perpetually on the make for campaign contributions, in chronic need of campaign cash for their next election, cash that will only be given (at least on a continuing basis) in return for their support. And the problem is systemic. As in many “crisis” due to the irrationality factor, one cannot unilaterally forego the money or special interest support and expect to win elections.

The tie between representative and interest group is far more pervasive and arguably stronger than the tie between representative and the voter back home--in classical democratic

theory, representatives only have to face the voters on a periodic basis. But even this tie, the tenuous tie between politician and voter in which the politician must garner support for his policies from his constituencies, has been rationalized as well.

### **The Rise of the Managers**

Concurrent with the rise of big money in the political process has come a new breed of campaign managers and consultants. Their lack of restraint is readily apparent from the title of the books they write: *Bare Knuckles and Back Rooms: My Life in American Politics* by Ed Rollins, (1996); or *All's Fair: Love, War, and Running for President* (1994) by James Carville and Mary Matalin. An exception would be *Behind the Oval Office: Winning the Presidency in the Nineties* (1997) by Dick Morris, which perhaps reflects Morris' penchant for deception and manipulation rather than out right war. Books and articles written about these hired guns also zero in on the theme of lack of restraint: *Bad Boy: The Life and Politics of Lee Atwater* (Brady, 1996); *Whatever It Takes: The Real Struggle for Political Power in America* (Drew, 1997); *War Without Bloodshed: The Art of Politics* (Clift and Brazaitis, 1997); "Manipulating the candidate"; and my personal favorite, "The 'conniving worm' factor" (Levine, 1997). That they represent something beyond the constraints of traditional American politics there should be no doubt.

There are about 7,000 full-time professionals in the field (Levine, 1997), though some estimate their numbers to be as high as 30,000 if the part-time consultants and those who emerge every election year are added (Rust, 1997). Billings are estimated to be about \$1 billion in the 1996 elections (Levine, 1997). They have their own professional association, The American Association of Political Consultants (AAPC), and their own journal, *Campaigns and Elections* with a circulation of about 70,000 (Rust, 1997). While few boys and girls want to grow up to be

political consultants, this too may be changing. Rust (1997) reports that a number of graduate programs have been started in political management, and salaries are comparable to public relations jobs at the same level--at the Washington level salaries start around \$60,000.

The vast number of consultants work at the state and local level, but the real stars work in national campaigns. Political consultants and managers are needed by candidates to raise money, organize massive advertising, arrange travel, schedule events, hire and manage staff, contract with advertising producers, coordinate with other groups (such as the party), conduct polls (so that the candidate knows which bold positions to take), and devise winning campaign strategies. Rust (1997), however, sums up their basic job in one word, manipulation.

Advances in the techniques of manipulation have come from the social sciences as well as advertising. Campaign operatives--many with no discernible political beliefs except winning elections--manipulate the press through photo-ops, and "spin doctors." Focus groups and survey information can uncover the emotional levers that will get us to buy a deodorant or a candidate. Advertising through mass media can pull many of these levers at will. Campaign organizations can target their propaganda by obtaining mailing lists--from magazines, special interest organizations, organizational and professional rolls, and lists of political donors from the Federal Elections Commission--of people likely to respond to the message (the same and similar lists are also used by major corporations to market their goods and services more efficiently).

In classical democratic theory, elections are intended to hold politicians accountable to the people, the vote is an exercise of sovereign power. But elections today could just as easily be thought of as contests between two candidates over market shares (in fact, elections today are thought of explicitly in these terms by the hired political operatives who dominate the election process). The same advertising agencies that sell us Pepsi Cola and Secret deodorant also pitch

candidates to us in local and national elections. And the advertising techniques are the same. These techniques rely on the manipulation of symbols in an attempt to create a bridge between the consumer's unconscious desires, fears, or anxieties and the product being sold. The objective is to get the consumer to believe that the purchase of the product will make his dream come true, or that she will be able to avoid her worst fears. Similarly, effective campaigners try to project a positive image and connect that image to flag, family values, or military strength.

Consultant Dick Morris, infamous for moving back and forth between parties as a political hired gun (as well as being infamous for other things), is clearly focused on image over substance. Consulting polls in order to put the best public face on his candidate he even designed the president's vacations: (Martha's Vineyard is too elitist, Clinton should go hiking with high-tech gear because hikers and technology-lovers were swing. As a rule, according to Morris, the president went along. When Morris suggested that the president should stop playing golf ("a Dole-voter activity"), however, Clinton said no (and many say this man stands for nothing!).

Alternatively, negative campaigning, which appears to be more prevalent today, attempts to smear opponents with half-truths and innuendo and connect their image with "special interests," licentiousness, or greed. Art Levine (1997) reports on one "Pollie award" winning attack ad on Rep. Bill Baker (Cal) at the 1997 AAPC produced by media consultant Joe White:

White's ad opened with an ominous voice reading words that flashed on the screen accompanied by shots of an evil-looking Baker. "Baseball players who spit in an umpire's face. Politicians who shut down the government to get even." The spot ended by showing Baker wading into a crowd to "attack" a protester at a political rally. "Don't we deserve better?" (p.2)

Finally, there are the new rapid response ads, or ads run to counter the negative advertising of your opponents. Stengel and Pooley (1996) report on the Clinton campaign's extensive research and development for responding quickly and efficiently to expected Dole attack ads.

Beginning in January, Squier, Knapp and Sheinkopf produced the kind of attack spots they expected from Dole. Penn and Schoen would test the in-house negative ads, then help come up with better ads to rebut them. Sheinkopf, a connoisseur of campaign hardball, hatched the ugliest attacks he could think of. Penczner then used an advertising technique called animatic, video rough cuts using dummy images that could be transmitted by computer to the malls where Penn and Schoen were testing the ads. Penczner and Knapp's people created a library of B-roll images, scowling Dole/Gingrich couplings, laughing children, kindly senior, forceful Clinton--any of which could be popped into the animatic to create a spot quickly and cheaply. Clinton's response ads were tested, refined and retested until they actually left voters feeling better about the President than they had before seeing the original Dole attack (p. 12).

Campaigns and political rhetoric have little to do with issues beyond the level of bumper sticker slogans. While these techniques are effective in winning elections (as they are in selling deodorant) they are harmful to the political system as a whole. Democracy can only survive if people make rational choices based on enlightened self-interest--enlightened self-interest of the variety described by de Tocqueville and Durkheim in the last chapter. In a 30 second television spot there is little time for serious consideration of political issues.

While what could be termed the corruption of the political campaign is widely recognized, it is usually perceived as a slight problem in democratic procedures, in need of reform but certainly nothing that threatens the foundations of the system. After all, it is reasoned, "trivial" issue-less campaigns are well known in American history. Such a view ignores the present-day sophistication and pervasiveness of manipulative technology and techniques.