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Evan Barrett

Montana Tech of the University of Montana

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Who's in charge: the "People" or the One-percent?

A Newspaper Column by Evan Barrett

February 26, 2016

*"The people," said a farmer's wife in a Minnesota country store while
her husband was buying a new post-hole digger,
"The people," she went on, "will stick around a long time.
"The people run the works, only they don't know it yet – you wait and see."
~~ Carl Sandberg in "The People, Yes" (1936) ~~*

The people running things. Powerful thought. But, is it just a nice sentiment or could it be a reality? Is it a genuine possibility, or just rhetorical candy for the masses, distracting them from the harsh reality that money rules the roost in America?

We were seven years into the Great Depression when Sandberg wrote those words. The economic disaster from the moneyed excesses of the 1920s had wreaked economic havoc on millions upon millions of American families. In 1933 when newly elected President Franklin Delano Roosevelt pushed aggressive programs to stop the economic bleeding, it helped some. But they hadn't stemmed the tide by the time Sandberg penned those words in 1936.

The income and wealth disparity of the 1920s that helped lead to the Depression is quite similar to our situation today, where more and more goes to the top 1%, the top one-tenth of 1%, and even the top one-one-hundredth of 1%. Our country's economic and tax policies have helped create this situation that has drained the middle class of its economic strength. The political/economic playing field is tilted to the advantage of the uber-rich and large corporations under the fallacious assumption that such policies create economic growth. The policies, in fact, build up the top tier, while helping decimate the middle class, an emerging economic disaster for America.

How does money rule the roost in Washington, DC? Check out these frightening statistics. Total expenditures for running for President in 1980 were about \$500 million. Inflation adjusted, today that level of expenditures should be about 3 times as much as 1980, or \$ 1½ billion. However, the actual total expenditure level anticipated for the 2016 presidential campaign is expected to be \$5 billion, 10 times as much as 1980. And the Citizens United decision of the Supreme Court is only making things worse.

A new Supreme Court Justice who would help reverse Citizen's United might begin leveling the playing field. But that is only a first step in returning our democracy into the hands of "the people." Congress also needs to implement new laws to limit money in politics. Would you bet that the "best Congress money can buy" will adopt legislation to reduce the influence of money in politics? That would be like expecting a pig to

voluntarily pull away from the feeding trough. Are our members of Congress wedded to the political feeding trough? Or are they open to putting the people back in charge.

Lord Acton famously said “power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Exchange the word “money” for “power” and you have an apt description of the politics of today, where many so-called leaders have an unfettered appetite for both money and power. A dangerously synergistic combination, money provides political power to the recipient of the campaign dough, while the power of influence goes to the the person or entity writing the check. And power, once established, demands more and more money. This is a vicious cyle that needs to be stopped.

Step one is getting a new Supreme Court Justice who would create a 5-4 reversal of Citizens United. And then, step two, the long slog of getting follow-up Congressional action.

Hopeless? Perhaps. But, we the people need to start holding elected officials and candidates accountable for their role in perpetuating this sordid money game. Only then will there be a chance that in coming years Sandberg’s farmer’s wife’s prediction will prove to be precient, not ironic.

This is Evan Barrett in Butte wondering if we can ever reduce the corrosiveness of money in our politics and produce a government that will really work for people.

Evan Barrett of Butte, has spent the last 46 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is currently the Director of Business & Community Outreach and an instructor at Highlands College of Montana Tech. These are his personal views.