

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

The Dollar Deluge

“Congressional Campaign Finance Reform: A Little May Be Better Than a Lot” by Bruce Larson, in *Miller Center Report* (Fall 1999), P.O. Box 5106, Charlottesville, Va. 22905; “Well Off” by John Mueller, in *The New Republic* (Nov. 15, 1999), 1220 19th St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036; “Money 2000” by Robert Dreyfuss, in *The Nation* (Oct. 18, 1999), 33 Irving Pl., New York, N.Y. 10003.

America is in for a hurricane of political spending this year, warns journalist Dreyfuss. With a toothless Federal Election Commission (FEC) and no hope of “real” campaign finance reform, he says, the country is stuck with “a free-wheeling, free-market political system in which politicians and parties are bought and sold by America’s ruling class.” In 1996, an estimated \$2.1 billion was spent on all campaigns for federal offices. “For 2000, if current trends hold,” he shudders, “the total could be \$3.5 billion.”

Why is that too much? asks Mueller, a political scientist at the University of Rochester. He points out that Procter & Gamble routinely spends some \$8 billion a year to market its products. Isn’t democracy worth half that amount?

“The undisciplined, chaotic, and essentially unequal interplay of special interest groups that reformers decry is not a perversion of democracy—it’s the whole point of it,” Mueller contends. “Democracy is fundamentally a system in which people are (equally) free to become politically unequal. They are allowed to try to increase their political importance by working in politics or by supplying money to appropriate places.” There’s no promise that everyone will have an equal impact. Many reformers worry particularly about the influence of business “fat cats.” But money isn’t everything. What about other influentials, such as leading political columnists? Mueller asks. Inequalities are unavoidable, he believes.

Ironically, he observes, “many of the ills reformers now seek to address are byproducts of earlier attempts to clean up the system. By capping individual contributions at the ludicrously

low level of \$1,000 . . . for example, the Watergate-era reforms diverted political funds into soft money (donations made directly to political parties, which the parties then spend to influence elections) or into direct-issue advertising—which happen to be the two primary targets of most current reforms.” The past reforms also helped billionaires such as Steve Forbes, who can finance their own campaigns, “or famous sons, such as George W. Bush, who inherit vast fund-raising networks.”

Larson, a political scientist at Fairleigh Dickinson University, is not a fan of the current system, but, addressing the problem of congressional campaign finance, says the obstacles in the way of an ideal system are insurmountable: “the constraints of the First Amendment, the impracticality of public financing for congressional elections, conflicting reform goals, and the propensities of those with a stake in election outcomes to find innovative ways around even the tightest of regulations.”

Larson believes a few modest reforms may be within reach, such as strengthened FEC regulation and perhaps a ban on party soft money, “provided it was accompanied by an across-the-board increase in hard money contribution limits.” Though Mueller opposes trying to restrict soft money, he, too, favors raising or even eliminating altogether the \$1,000 limit set in 1974 on direct contributions. Inflation has since reduced the real value of that amount to less than \$400. “Politicians seem to find it politically incorrect to advocate this sensible change,” he writes, “even though it would probably reduce the amount of time they spend” chasing after campaign dollars.

Simpson Family Values

“*The Simpsons: Atomistic Politics and the Nuclear Family*” by Paul A. Cantor, in *Political Theory* (Dec. 1999), Sage Publications, 2455 Teller Rd., Thousand Oaks, Calif. 91320.

No issue has roiled American politics more than “family values” in recent years,

and for many who decry their decline, Exhibit A is the popularity of TV’s dysfunc-