

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-



Dysfunctional defenders of traditional values?

tional cartoon family, the Simpsons. What unwholesome role models! traditionalist critics wail. But they should take a closer look, argues Cantor, an English professor at the University of Virginia. “For all its slapstick nature and its mocking of certain aspects of family life, *The Simpsons* . . . ends up celebrating the nuclear family as an institution. For television, this is no minor achievement.”

While focusing on the nuclear family, the series relates it to larger institutions—church, school, and even political institutions, such as city government—satirizing them, to be sure, but at the same time acknowledging their importance, Cantor says. The show makes fun of small-town life, but “simultaneously celebrates the virtues of the traditional American small town.”

The subtext of *The Simpsons*, creator Matt Groening has said, is that “the people in power don’t always have your best interests in mind.” This view of politics, adds Cantor, “has something to offer to both liberals and conservatives. *The Simpsons* is based on distrust of power and especially of

power remote from ordinary people. The show celebrates genuine community, a community in which everybody more or less knows everybody else (even if they do not necessarily like each other). By recreating this older sense of community, the show manages to generate a kind of warmth out of its postmodern coolness, a warmth that is largely responsible for its success with the American public.”

The Simpsons, “hip, postmodern, self-aware,” is hardly a simple reprise of *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* or the other TV family shows of the 1950s, Cantor acknowledges. But “for roughly the past two decades, much of American television has been suggesting that the breakdown of the American family does not constitute a social crisis or even a serious problem,” and in that context, *The Simpsons’* unorthodox defense of the nuclear family stands out.

“In effect,” writes Cantor, “the show says, ‘Take the worst-case scenario—the Simpsons—and even that family is better than no family.’ In fact, the Simpson family is not all that bad.” Though young Bart’s “disrespect for authority and especially for his teachers” appalls some critics, Cantor believes he is “an updated version of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn.”

But what about Homer, the “dumb, uneducated, weak in character, and morally unprincipled” Simpson father? “Homer is all those things,” says Cantor, “but at least he is there. He fulfills the bare minimum of a father: he is present for his wife and above all his children. . . . He continually fails at being a good father, but he never gives up trying, and in some basic and important sense that makes him a good father.”

In one episode, Cantor points out, “the question of whether the Simpson family really is dysfunctional” is explored. The civil authorities decide that Homer and his wife, Marge, are unfit parents, send them off to a “family skills class” for reeducation by experts, and turn the Simpson children over to the God-fearing parents next door. But neither “the old-style moral/religious family” nor “the therapeutic state” proves superior in the end. The show concludes, Cantor says, “that the Simpson children are better off with their real

parents . . . simply because Homer and Marge are the people most genuinely

attached to Bart, Lisa, and Maggie, since the children are their own offspring.”

Who Governs?

International organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank may do much good, but Robert Dahl, the noted Yale University political scientist, points out in *Social Research* (Fall 1999) that they share a grave defect.

After the extraordinary triumphs of democracy in the 20th century, must we, at the century's end, turn to the antidemocratic visions of Plato and Confucius in the hope that we can entrust the governments of international organizations to rulers of adequate virtue, wisdom, and incorruptibility? This would require rulers virtuous enough to seek good ends, wise enough to know the best means to achieve them, and sufficiently incorruptible to maintain their virtue and wisdom despite the temptations of power, ideology, and dogma.

The historical record is not, in my view, reassuring, and I confess that I am as skeptical about the desirability of guardianship in governing international organizations as I am about its desirability in governing countries. Yet solutions are unclear. Consequently, I hope that in the coming century some of our best social scientists would turn to the question of how international organizations can be governed in ways consistent with democratic goals.

FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

Too Much Information

“The Surprising Logic of Transparency” by Bernard I. Finel and Kristin M. Lord, in *International Studies Quarterly* (June 1999), Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 350 Main St., Malden, Mass. 02148.

Transparency is a popular buzzword among the international relations cognoscenti these days, reassuringly suggesting, in this age of Matt Drudge and Cable Network News, that an open society's abundance of available information gives peace a better chance. "Tain't usually so, declare Finel and Lord, professors of political science at Georgetown University and George Washington University, respectively.

They examined seven international crises, from the War of 1812 to the Sino-Soviet border dispute of 1969—all cases in which neither side wanted war, though in four cases, it came anyway. With the exception of World War I, on which the impact was unclear, Finel and Lord found that “transparency” often worsened the crisis. In one case, it appeared that a *lack* of trans-

parency allowed an easing of tensions.

Take the 1967 conflict between “transparent” Israel and opaque Egypt, which led to a short war in June that neither wanted. Israel's openness to outside observers did no favor to Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser. He seemed “overwhelmed by the ‘noise’ of Israeli domestic politics,” the authors say. “Due to press reports that emphasized the more belligerent statements made by Israeli leaders, media reports that highlighted divided domestic opinion about how to respond, and Nasser's consequent presumption that he could safely draw out the crisis for political gain, transparency exacerbated rather than mitigated the pressures for war.” Nasser had so much information, in short, that he could “see whatever he wanted and con-