Why Presidential Elections are Irrelevant

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game, the election contest, is supposed to be fair; votes are to be counted accurately, and all participants are bound to accept the results of this count.

However, we know that election fraud, of various types, has been present since there have been elections. Some of the cruder forms are no longer practiced but new technologies create new opportunities for election tampering—as in hacking into the new electronic voting machines. But even more problematic than election fraud are the more indirect, and often perfectly legal, ways in which election results can be influenced. This is mostly about using money to influence election outcomes.

A good case can be made that throughout the history of this nation those with money have always held disproportionate political power and have had significant influence over the outcome of elections. What is different now is the sophistication and power that advertising, public relations, and "spin" have on political outcomes. In the early 20th century, Freud's nephew Edward Bernays, known as the father of public relations, started plying his trade of manipulating people's likes, dislikes, and desires. Going back as far as the early 1920s when Walter Lippmann said that propaganda had already become "a regular organ of popular government" (Edward S. Herman & Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, 1988, xi), the persuasive arts have become an increasingly important part of the political process. This field is truly a bastard nephew of psychoanalysis as the power and effectiveness of the techniques used are, in part, dependent on the operation of unconscious processes. The stimulation of and appeal to the wishes and feelings of the id—sex and aggression and their manifold variants—are what gives advertising and public relations its power. Its effectiveness is enhanced when it operates in the dark, out of conscious awareness. It is far easier to influence and manipulate people when they do not know that it is being done.

In our time there have been advances in the technology of electoral rhetoric: persuading voters to vote in the desired manner. Political consultants, pollsters, marketing specialists, image consultants, and campaign managers are all needed personnel in a contemporary high stakes election campaign. Doing all this requires money, and the more you can spend the more influence you can buy. As the Supreme Court of the United States has decided, money, or decisions as to what to spend it on and how much to spend, is actually a form of speech, and thus the freedom to do how and what with any of it you may have is a right guaranteed by the First Amendment to the *Constitution of the United States* (*Buckley v. Valeo*, 424 U.S. 1 1976). Selected and directed spending can influence not only the outcome of elections, but also the political behavior of those who are elected.

Money can buy votes, most often indirectly by means of advertising—using the media, visual and print, to influence elections. The outcome of an election depends chiefly on the quantities of money that can be spent on the contest. Over the last several election cycles the amount of money spent per election, particularly at the federal level, has been growing phenomenally with each new election. While the candidate who spends the most does not always win, unless a candidate has the resources to spend approximately as much as his opponent(s) he is unlikely to win.

Money can also buy lobbying services—the practice of persuading elected officials to do what you want them to do. Like campaign financing, the amounts of money spent on and by an increasingly large number of lobbyists working for an increasingly large number of special interest groups has been growing at a rapid pace in recent years. This is the world of public relations—of "manufacturing consent," to characterize what public relations does, and of "engineering consent," Bernays' term for getting the public to want what the payers for public relations and advertising want them to want. Both are methods for getting people to act in ways that are in the payers' best interests rather than the public's. This is the group and social psychology of Gustave LeBon, Wilfred Trotter, and Freud who see the "crowd" and the "masses" as suggestible and malleable since they are governed by primitive instincts and are prone to follow leaders. Freud's contention in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* is that when individuals form a cohesive entity by bonding with one another by means of mutual identifications, they regress, giving up their superego and parts of their ego functioning over to the group leader. Then, if the leader gives permission, primitive wishes, particularly of an aggressive nature, are

granted free rein to be expressed without the usual constraints which ordinarily inhibit individuals from acting on their baser impulses.

There is still a widespread myth that the political system is responsive to non-monetary forms of influence—that we live in a democracy in which the will of the people is expressed. This is much to the benefit and liking of the powers that be. Keeping the myth alive—that the game of politics is really on the level, that the will of the majority of the citizens is a significant influence on the outcome—plays a key role in keeping the actual system of governance operating in the service of the moneyed elites. The illusion that ordinary people have power and choices encourages people to funnel their time, energy, and interest into electoral politics, diverting it away from other forms of political activity that might lead to real change. One possibility would be actions such as boycotts and strikes which would directly impact the economic fortunes of targeted corporations. A second would be a well-financed media campaign to promote meaningful campaign finance reform by seeking to embarrass politicians by publicizing who is giving how much to their campaign funds and what favors they have received from what lobbyists.

So, back to the central question: how much of a difference does it make to choose one over another of the eight or so presidential hopefuls who could realistically win in 2008? While it is always possible to point to ways in which government policies under each of two possible administrations might be similar or different, it is impossible to know how much of a difference there would actually be. We are comparing an actual to a hypothetical, as in real Bush administration policies versus what a Gore or Kerry administration would be doing.

My argument is that both the Republican and Democratic parties, and the major presidential candidates who represent them, agree on basic issues far more than they disagree. Of the many areas of agreement, I want to focus on just one: all viable Republican and mainstream Democratic presidential candidates are firm believers in the principle that free market corporate capitalism, with at most a limited and circumscribed role for government regulation, is the only feasible economic system. What this means is that no matter which of the contenders gets to be our next president, large corporations will wield enormous power and influence on the political process. There is a good deal of conflict and competition between these corporations, and it's difficult to predict which sector, industry, or group of corporations will come out on top. But what does seem quite predictable is that money will continue to rule. Whoever wins the election, we will still be living under an oligarchy rather than a democracy.

Perhaps the most insidious aspect of attempting to change policy by participating in the conventional political process is that it is a distraction that actually works in favor of maintaining the *status quo* by diverting the energy and wasting the time of those who want to bring about real political change. Election contests function much as the "bread and circuses" of the Roman emperors, as a way to satisfy and distract the population. They become a form of entertainment, much like a sporting event—in the most common metaphor, a horse race—where all the focus is placed on how the race progresses and who "wins." For example, the *Berkshire Eagle*, my hometown newspaper, had prominent news articles recently reporting on how much money the presidential candidates had raised in the summer reporting quarter. Hillary Clinton won the contest by bringing in $27 million. Barack Obama came in second with a mere $19 million. John Edwards was the loser with a paltry $7 million. And Republican newcomer Fred Thompson made news by scoring $11.5 million. (*Berkshire Eagle*, Oct. 2, 2007, A3; *Berkshire Eagle*, Oct. 3, 2007, A2)

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