

# The \$6 Billion Circus

ENVISIONING A MORE DEMOCRATIC ELECTION PROCESS

It is finished. For the next three years, we can rest until new candidates saturate our media, hit us up for cash, and bring us new hopes and talking points. Unlike us, however, these future candidates are not resting now. They are serving in our government. And they are looking for money.

The Occupy Wall Street movement takes no political stance. The 99 percent includes various parties and our cause is not based on superficial party lines but on the lines of injustice, primarily stemming from financial inequality. The participants of Occupy share the strong sense that our system has failed us.

Every election, the minimum sum of money necessary to compete for office grows, even more now with super-PACs injecting millions of dollars into elections. Some commentators liken running for office to a nuclear arms race. Former Rep. Walt Minnick (D-Idaho) told NPR that five days after his election in 2008, he began fundraising for re-election because, "I needed to raise \$10,000 to \$15,000 a day." According to the Campaign Finance Institute, the average Senate campaign in 2010 cost \$8,002,726.

"What disease could we have cured with the money spent on campaign ads?" NBC anchorman Brian Williams asked live on election night. The Center for Responsive Politics (CRP) reports that close to \$6 billion was spent on the elections. Experts expect this number to rise, which ought to make us, as a people, enraged. If there is enough money given freely to an individual's candidacy, why isn't there enough money to pay for universal health care? For aid to foreclosure victims? For education?

In a vacuum of government action, the Occupy movement is a self-determined group helping us to help ourselves. A project called the Rolling Jubilee has sprouted recently from the movement. The project purchases debt from the market at record low prices and, instead of collecting on that debt as typical investors do, abolishes that debt. With the \$100,000-plus raised so far, more than \$1 million of debt will be bought and eradicated from the system. Have you heard of this project? If not, you might reconsider where you get your news.

The health of a democracy depends on an informed public. Propaganda (aka public relations) makes war to win our minds by confusing public opinion through the mightiest weapon of all: misinformation. We are all aware that Obamacare exists, but does anyone understand what it is? Politicians and news outlets try to frame the arguments for us, creating a debate that boils down to "American" and "Un-American." The media reports sensationally on social rights like gay marriage, birth control and marijuana use, while ignoring war, homelessness and climate change. Both the liberal and conservative mass media fail our democratic process by denying airtime to the third-party candidates.

Our election process has become a circus — and the most expensive in the world. Although the most powerful members of our society bow to the few days we hold our elections, those days are rigged by the disproportionate sums of money they spend to make sure their candidates get in. The CRP wrote that, as of 2010, 47 percent of Congress members were millionaires, while 1 percent of Americans holds that status. The rules for campaigning must be re-written: we need a limit on how much can be spent. The rules for candidacy, too, need adjusting: third-party candidates must be allowed into official debates. We must hold media accountable; we need and deserve a real journalistic process.

We, the 99 percent, from every part of the political spectrum, are united by disillusionment with our representatives and the process by which we elect them. Occupiers seek to take matters into their own hands and build from the bottom up. By refusing to endorse political figures, Occupy chooses not to dignify their circus. Occupy has constructed its own consensus-based, non-hierarchical structure, by and for the people.

Professor Noam Chomsky, speaking to Occupy Boston last year, envisioned a real democracy. It would involve communities, he said, talking to each other and deciding what they want. Candidates who sought their votes would need to go to those communities, not to talk to them — but to listen. The people would tell the candidate what they expect from him or her in order to win their vote. What do *you* think democracy should look like? ■

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