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Week 5: Is the US democratic?

Takeaway:

- There are developments on democratic premises (campaign contributions, political participation, the Tea Party) which lead to undemocratic processes and/or undemocratic outcomes.
- Is it a problem if the US is not democratic in particular ways?

(1) What's at stake here?

- Individual liberty
 - Protected by: the separation of powers/checks and balances in the political system; the courts; elections
 - Threatened by: the war powers of the President; the growth of the national security administration; that institutional checks and balances appear to be partisan checks and balances (e.g. between the legislature and the executive); ignorance?
- Political equality: vote and voice
 - Protected by: an equal franchise; freedom of speech
 - Threatened by:
 - Barriers to voting (Rosenstone and Hansen)
 - The Electoral College (not every vote counts for one) (Levinson)
 - Socioeconomic bias in political participation (unequal voice) (Schlozman, Verba and Brady; Rosenstone and Hansen)
 - Campaign financing (unequal voice?) (Lessig)

(2) Campaign financing (Lessig)

- Causes: when Congress became more competitive; when campaigns began to rely more on new media/tech
- Effects:
 - Greater party polarization.
 - Importance of lobbyists in the "economy of influence". Campaign donations are a way to create obligations between donor and legislator – not a direct payment for a specific action/law.
 - MPs spend 30-70% of their time raising funds.
 - Distorts policy: distorts what's on the agenda, creates a gap between public opinion and what lobbyists/donors want.
 - Undermines trust in the political system.
- Why this is a problem: the framers wanted a republic that was "dependent upon the People alone". This creates a competing dependency – legislators are dependent upon the people *and* the funders.
 - "My point isn't that democracy requires equal influence. It is that the influence that is to express itself, however unequally, is the influence of votes in an election." (160) So the point is not avoiding unequal influence; it's preserving electoral influence.

- But: Ansolabehere, Snyder and Figueiredo (2003): there's surprisingly little money in US elections. Candidates and party committees raised almost \$3bil in the 1999-2000 election cycle, of which \$2.4bil came from individuals. About 10% of voters gave money – so the average contribution was \$115. They regress the roll call voting score produced by the Chamber of Commerce against corporate and labor campaign contributions. After controlling for district and legislator preferences (e.g. the party legislators belong to), they find that contributions have no effect on legislative voting. Campaign contributions are better thought of not as consumption, not investment.
- Public financing: Arizona as a [case study](#)? Arizona's Clean Elections law of 1998 provided a flat sum from public funds to candidates (who had to raise donations first) and matching funds to match rivals who did not take public funding. The Supreme Court struck down the matching funds component in 2011. The law helped small-government conservatives to be elected – helped the extreme right (rather than extreme left, who were potential beneficiaries too).
- Some facts: Obama in 2008 was the first presidential candidate to refuse federal funding. Raised \$748m for the primary and general elections. McCain raised \$220m for his primary election, and received \$84m in public funds for the general election (and raised another \$46m privately for legal and accounting expenses). The public financing spending limit was \$42m for the primary election and \$84m for the general election. According to the [Campaign Finance Institute](#): almost all presidential campaign contributions come from individuals, vs political committees. The Obama campaign raised \$337m for the general election, out of which about one-third (\$114m) came from individuals who gave \$200 or less. Another 23% gave \$200-\$999, and 42% gave \$1000 or more.

(3) The Tea Party

- Skocpol/Williamson's question: is the Tea Party good for democracy?
- Description of the [Brookline Tea Party](#) from the Tea Party Patriots website: "America is the best country on the face of the Earth that God has given man. Let's keep it that way. Let's fight the evil baby-eating fascists that want to take over our lives!"
 - *Some* virtues are necessary for democracy. E.g. Hand: the spirit of liberty is the spirit that is not too sure it's right.