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Passy, France

“No qualification of wealth, of birth, of religious faith, or of civil profession is permitted to fetter the judgment or disappoint the inclination of the people.”

Federalist #57 (Hamilton or Madison)

CURBING AN AMERICAN OLIGARCHY

By Joseph Novitski

The roles of money in politics are many. We Americans now concentrate on the blatant buying of elections, and therefore, of electoral offices, in our republic. However, money is only an instrument. The users and the uses of money emerging in American politics speak to me of a coalescing American oligarchy, intent on defending wealth and privilege. That oligarchy in formation, and its use of money power to influence, even control, public policy constitutes a direct threat to our republic.

The argument that a wealthy and determined minority can control the government of a democracy predates our republic (see *Federalist Paper #57*); and so does one possible countermeasure: obligatory national service, both military and civilian. National service has worked, in the pre-Revolutionary War past of citizen militias, through the Public Works Administration during the Great Depression and in the draft during two World Wars, as a way to bond the wealthy with the commonwealth. Nothing in our history suggests that obligatory national service affects the distribution of wealth; but it could be the way to again allow all Americans a chance to develop an adult sense of shared responsibility for the country and a common purpose in maintaining the republic as a joint enterprise, not as a battlefield for the haves and the have-nots.

A battlefield is the reigning metaphor for American politics. After decades of failed legislative efforts to control the influence of money over elections, and in the wake of the 2010 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United*, the contestants for political power are increasingly identified as the haves (one per cent) and the have nots (99 per cent). And the haves increasingly seem to believe that open elections are an existential threat. They are behaving like the oligarchies I watched at work in South America, which were ruthless in defense of their wealth and interests beneath a surface of elected governments of both left and right; also behind and within military dictatorships.

A parallel has begun to emerge here, most clearly at the state level. From 2010 through 2014, conservative organizations and individuals spent scores of millions to elect – and defend – union-busting governors in the Midwest. Campaign spending for Scott Walker in Wisconsin and Bruce Rauner in Illinois roughly doubled the spending by supporters of their opponents. The low-budget, anti-tax agendas of both governors closely parallel that of the 43-year-old incubator of conservative legislation called the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), an alliance of corporations with state and federal legislators backed, initially, by the Koch brothers. ALEC opposes public employee unions, government spending and taxation that support social welfare spending.

The New York Times reported last October that 158 families had contributed \$176-million to 2016 presidential campaigns by mid-2015. The *Times* found that the funding families responsible for almost half of the campaign donations lived - and socialized with one another – in exclusive enclaves in only nine cities, but the paper did not report any clear definition of their goals. However, in 2011 three social scientists probed for those goals by polling 83 families in and around Chicago with fortunes of five to over forty million dollars. In a paper published in 2013 by Northwestern University, they concluded:

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“We find that they are extremely active politically and that they are much more conservative than the American public as a whole with respect to important policies concerning taxation, economic regulation, and especially social welfare programs. Variation within this wealthy group suggests that the top one-tenth of 1 percent of wealthholders (people with \$40 million or more in net worth) may tend to hold still more conservative views that are even more distinct from those of the general public.”

Wealth accumulates through combinations of creativity, persistence, luck, ambition, focus and greed. Setting creativity and luck aside, these qualities, most particularly greed, demand inequality. None of the remaining qualities can serve, alone or together, as the mainspring or the organizing principle, of an enduring democratic society.

The attributes that make the rich wealthy demand winners, who become richer, and losers, who do not. The rich have not become wealthy by pursuing zero-sum goals. In politics, greed, in particular, demands victory and sustained control. PACs, SuperPACs, and “social welfare” groups buy both, to serve the interests - and the whims - of the individual fortunes that fund those hungry pools of money power. We have seen the results for over a decade in Congress, where electoral winners will take all – or block all.

One way back to grassroots social solidarity in the United States and away from the divisions between regions, religions, races and riches in the country – the way I will recommend from personal experience – is a new legal requirement for two years of national service, military or civilian, for American women and men over 18 and under 30. From the founding of our republic until 1968, the sons and daughters of privilege learned in state militias, in military basic training and in training for the Peace Corps and Teach For America, that rough, even undereducated men and women were just as effective, and even as wise as more privileged teachers and peers.

We must defend the United States against foreign enemies; but also against internal division over the power to purchase and hold political influence. I propose that we identify every citizen at an early age with some segment of our country’s common goals. Infrastructure needs repair. Huge swaths of forest need replanting. Schools across the country need saving. Cyber attacks threaten the public and private sectors. There are talents and skills among young Americans that can be organized, in a two-year melting pot, to address these and other problems.

Call them Interns for Democracy. And fund their work, initially, by reallocating funds within the Departments of Defense, of State, of the Interior, of Agriculture, Commerce, Health and Human Services and Homeland Security. Funding such national service will require additional moneys, to be sure, but what price should we put on reestablishing the democratic foundation of our republic?

Joseph Novitski

Joe Novitski was born on the far side of the Pacific and raised on the near side in California and Peru. Educated on the East Coast and in Italy, he served in the U.S. Naval Reserve and made his way into journalism via the Associated Press, then The New York Times. For the last 30 years, he managed in family agricultural partnerships in California and South America.

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