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# In a Democracy, Are Some Citizens More Important than Others?

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## The Individual Citizen

Ally Brown is a thirty-year-old kindergarten teacher who is raising her two children in a middle-class North-eastern suburb. Her six-year-old son, Alex, has been chronically ill for the past five years. As is typical in many chronic illnesses, Alex has good days and bad days. After years of tests, and appointments with different specialists, doctors concluded that Alex's illness is an allergy to a preservative used by food manufacturers to increase the shelf life of a wide range of products. The current Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations do not require the food manufacturers to identify the specific preservative on the label. Only the generic category must be displayed. Since generic preservatives are in almost every food product on the market, Ally Brown has few options for preparing her son's meals. If the FDA changed the current regulations, requiring all manufacturers to identify specific preservatives on the packaging, Alex's risk of getting sick from a product containing the preservative would be greatly reduced. During her lunch breaks at work and after her children have gone to bed, Ally Brown writes letters to her representatives in the Congress and the Senate, and she calls and writes to the appropriate people in the FDA. She also convinces some of her friends and neighbors to join in her efforts by taking the time to educate them.

## The Corporate Citizen

As Ally Brown is devoting her time to reducing the incidence of illness in her child's life, lobbyists for the food industry are being paid handsomely to work in "Gucci Gulch." This term describes the Congressional corridors filled with lobbyists in fancy shoes whose job is to persuade elected officials to vote in a manner most beneficial to the corporation or special interest group paying their salaries.<sup>1</sup> These lobbyists meet and socialize with Ally Brown's elected representatives to provide them with "industry research" addressing Brown's concerns. Ironically, the food-manufacturing lobbyists have written legislation that reduces ingredient disclosure requirements. Industry representatives argue that there

are no differences in the dozen or so compounds that make up the generic preservative group in question.

In addition to providing the federal representatives with "research" and "completed legislation," lobbyists often have "golden rolodexes," or lists of donors who can write a \$10,000 check toward the elected official's re-election campaign. In a sense, the money enables corporate representatives to purchase "access" to elected officials who introduce and vote on legislation directly affecting the corporation.<sup>2</sup> The average cost of winning a congressional and senate seat during the 2006 campaign season was \$966,000 and \$7.8 million, respectively.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the high costs of election and re-election to federal office make it difficult for elected officials to ignore lobbyists' attention.

## Money Talks

Ally Brown's phone calls and letters have netted her three form letters from the offices of her congressperson and senators. The form letters do not address her concerns. Instead, the letters thank her for her interest and one senator listed his unrelated legislative accomplishments. Friends and neighbors that Ally has engaged in her efforts had similar experiences. Her son, Alex, continues to have good and bad days. Ally Brown is worried that her son's chronic illness will interfere with his learning when he enters first grade in the fall. In the mean time, food-manufacturing lobbyists continue to meet with Brown's representatives to provide them with "research" and "written legislation" that will solidify the position of the food-manufacturer when their bill is introduced.

## The Payoff

This scenario is not unusual. It is naïve to think that money elected officials need to fund campaigns is not extracted without high costs. "Representative Barney Frank jokes that 'politicians are the only human beings in the world who are expected to take thousands of dollars from perfect strangers on important matters and not be affected by it.'"<sup>3</sup> In 2006, industry lobbyists spent

approximately \$2.45 billion to influence elected officials at the federal level. This is a 69% increase from 1998 when lobbyists' contributions totaled \$1.45 billion.<sup>2</sup> Terms like “Gucci Gulch,” “Golden Rolodexes” and “access,”<sup>3</sup> that describe daily business in the House and Senate, give one the impression that democracy in the U.S. is a commodity available to the highest bidders.

Three examples illustrate the high returns for investing in elected officials. When Lockheed Martin Corporation representatives invested \$8.2 million, lobbying legislators and contributing to their reelection campaigns, their efforts were rewarded with government contracts totaling over \$12 billion.<sup>4</sup> In 2006, California legislators passed a bill to ensure that school breakfasts and lunches would include “fresh fruit.” The food processing industry opposed what seemed like a reasonable measure to address the rising rates of childhood obesity. Because the food processing industry had contributed more than \$2.3 million to 189 state legislators, they were able to have the bill reworded. “Fresh fruit” was changed to “nutritious fruit,” providing the industry an entrée for their canned fruit in syrup into the California public schools.<sup>6</sup>

Since 1990, pharmaceutical executives and corporations have contributed \$139,276,451 to federal campaigns. This is a 480% increase over the past 16 years from \$3,325,792 in 1990 to \$19,305,662 during the 2006 election cycle.<sup>2</sup> The massive contributions gave the industry representatives the ability to author the Medicare Modernization Act or Medicare Part D, as it is more commonly known. The resulting legislation directed billions of dollars to pharmaceutical corporations, while making modest improvements at best for individual citizens. The close relationship between the pharmaceutical industry and elected officials also begs the questions of drug safety. How can citizens expect their elected officials to have concern for the safety of their constituents, when the officials depend on the pharmaceutical and other industry representatives for continued contributions to their campaigns?

## Two Citizen Classes

The money that corporate citizens invest in our elected officials has a return rate superior to the best investment firms on Wall Street. No wonder that some feel there are two classes of citizens: those who can pay (corporate citizens) and those who cannot (individual citizens). In recent years, American democracy has created laws that protect two groups, individuals, and corporations. Corporate citizenship is conceptualized “as the administra-

tion of a bundle of individual citizenship rights—social, civil, and political—conventionally granted and protected by governments.”<sup>7</sup> Individual citizens are “the people to whom a democratic government is accountable ... and are all are equal before the law and have the same fundamental rights, duties, and responsibilities.”<sup>8</sup> Federal legislation defines the rights for both individuals and corporations. For example, federal legislation mandates that all citizens 18 years and over are eligible to vote regardless of their race or color. Alternately, the minimum miles per gallon standards for automobiles are a federal mandate that manufacturers must meet.

While corporate citizens are quite healthy, as evidenced by the unprecedented growth in corporate profit margins and chief executive salaries, individual citizens have not fared as well. More than 12 million children live in households where there is not enough money to provide adequate nutritional needs.<sup>9</sup> In 2004, 42 million people in the United States did not have health insurance.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, they are often unable to afford routine physician visits and prescription drugs to reduce the duration of an infection or alleviate the pain of illnesses. How do the Ally Browns of the world advocate legislative change through letters and phone calls, when their elected officials receive campaign contributions from industry lobbyists? This is the very same group that Ally Brown is trying to challenge in an effort to improve her son's life. Where do the responsibilities of the elected officials lie?

## Individual Citizens as Donors

Researchers find that individuals can and do purchase legislative favor, but for the American household with a median income of \$46,326, the decision to contribute competes with other daily priorities.<sup>11</sup> Further, one might question if a contribution of \$25 matters. The federal law allows individuals to contribute up to \$2,300 to a presidential candidate during the 2008 election cycle. The results of a random survey administered to individual campaign donors—half of whom had contributed a minimum of \$5,000 to a federal candidate—were compared with results from a survey administered to non-contributing registered voters.<sup>12</sup> The findings indicate that campaign donors were not average American voters. They were disproportionately white, male, older, and wealthier than the average voter.<sup>13</sup>

## The Value of Connections

Recent analysis of federal election committee data indicates that in areas where one political party tends to dominate (e.g., Democrats in the Boston area), almost equal dollars are raised by the opposing party, both at the local and national levels. These fundraising networks enable donors to access more than political influence.<sup>14</sup> In addition to buying “access,” participating in the political process as a “high roller” solidifies friendships in influential areas and provides access to desirable social networks. Social science research finds that these networks include business, education, and social connections and help facilitate social mobility.<sup>15</sup>

## What Do We Do?

Recent analysis of contributions to the 2004 presidential election show that donors continue to be disproportionately wealthy, white, more educated, and older than the average American voter. However, during the 2004 campaign, individual contributions of \$200 or less increased as compared to the 2000 elections. These donors contributed not because they would receive something tangible in return, but as a result of the importance that they felt the election held.<sup>16</sup>

If the majority of individual contributions come from Americans in the highest income brackets, and if corporate citizens have greater powers than the majority of individuals, where does that leave the 99% of Americans like Ally Brown? Has citizenship been lost for the vast majority of Americans? Groups of individuals are working to develop ideas to address these inequities. What options do you think are possible?

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Birnbaum and Allen Murray use the term Gucci Gulch in their 1988 book titled *Showdown at Gucci Gulch—Lawmakers, Lobbyists, and the Unlikely Triumph of Tax Reform*.

<sup>2</sup> Center for Responsive Politics.

<sup>3</sup> Ari Berman’s quotes Congressman Barney Frank (MA) in his comments titled “Making Elections Fair” in the April 30, 2007 issue of *The Nation*.

<sup>4</sup> “Campaign Finance: Coming to Terms: A Money-in-Politics Glossary.” <http://www.campaignfinancesite.org/structure/terms/l.html>—website for the Hoover Institution which excerpted from [www.opensecrets.org](http://www.opensecrets.org)—website for Center for Responsive Politics.

<sup>5</sup> Miller, Ellen S. and Micah L. Sifry. 2000. “Who Gives?” *The American Prospect* October 23, pg. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Hamilton, Joan. 2007. “Politics Watchdog Follows the Money.” *The Nation* (Online version only). June 11. Retrieved on June 17, 2007. <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20070625/hamilton>, Newman, Dan. 2006. “What is the Price of Our Children’s Health?” retrieved from Maplight.org on June 17, 2007. <http://www.maplight.org/node/73>.

<sup>7</sup> Matten, Dirk and Andrew Crane. 2005. “Corporate Citizenship: Toward an Extended Theoretical Conceptualization.” *The Academy of Management Review* 30:166–179.

<sup>8</sup> John Patrick, *Understanding Democracy, A Hip Pocket Guide* (Oxford University Press).

<sup>9</sup> Household Food Security in the United States. 2005. ERR-29. Economic Research Service. USDA. pg. 16.

<sup>10</sup> National Center for Health Statistics. “Fast Stats A to Z.” Retrieved on June 13th from <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/hinsure.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> DeNavas-Walt, Carmen, Proctor, Bernadette D. and Cheryl Hill Lee. 2006. “Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2005.” U.S. Census Bureau. Retrieved on June 20, 2007. <http://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/p60-231.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Lake, Celinda and Robert Borosage. 2000. “Money Talks.” *The Nation*. August 20.

<sup>13</sup> In fact, Lake and Borosage found that seventy-five percent of the donors were male compared to 48% of the average voters in 2000, 20% of the donors were under the age of 44 compared with 40% of the voters. Economically, 80% of the donors explained that that they had benefited from the economic boom leading up to the 2000 election compared to 42% of the average American voters.

<sup>14</sup> Gimpel, James G., Lee, Frances E and Joshua Kaminsky. 2006. “The Political Geography of Campaign Contributions in American Politics.” *The Journal of Politics*. 68:626–639.

<sup>15</sup> For example, the work of sociologist William Julius Wilson. *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*, (1987) Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press; and *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*, (1996) New York: Knopf.

<sup>16</sup> Panagopoulos, Costas and Daniel Bergan. 2006. “Contributions and Contributors in the 2004 Presidential Election Cycle.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36:155–171.