

Time to take back our government

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The name Buddy Roemer might not exactly roll off your tongue -- yet. But he will have a place in the 2012 presidential election story. He's running on a platform with a timely message, like it or not. Roemer served four terms in Congress from 1981-88 as a Democrat who often broke ranks with his party to vote with President Ronald Reagan, and was Louisiana governor from 1988-92 as both a Democrat and Republican.

Recently he's joined the presidential race within the Republican Party, but has yet to be allowed a podium in the GOP debates. Roemer asks why a former congressman and governor is not being given a place with the other candidates to present the central issue of his campaign: the corrupting influence of big money.

Roemer is basing his campaign on the message that big money has essentially ruined the U.S. political system. For the future of democracy in America, donations to politicians and political parties must be drastically limited.

"I have a \$100 donation limit, and won't accept any money from PACs or super PACs," he says. "Big money comes with strings attached, and a president needs to be free to lead, free to stand up to corporations and special interests, and free to listen to groups like the Occupy movement."

Turns out, Roemer is a Republican renegade. He is the only Republican candidate to visit Occupy Wall Street camps. He speaks sympathetically of their goals.

Asked why the organizers of the Republican debates do not allow him to participate, he has said that they "seem to like to make up the rules as they go along."

"First, you had to be a registered candidate. After I registered, I called to let them know I was ready to debate, and was told you had to have at least 1 percent in a national poll. Then I got to 1 percent, and was told that you have to have 2 percent. Then I was told you have to have 2 percent, and had to have earned \$500,000 in campaign contributions in the last quarter. Why do they do it? Who knows? Maybe having someone up on the stage that makes sense doesn't sell."

Truth is the superrich and superinfluential have walked off with our government. Today's big-money-beholden election system is hardly recognizable to those who remember U.S. politics of the 1980s, let alone the more innocent, that is, less financially corrupted, days of the 1970s and 1960s.

It's not news that big money dominates our elections. But the numbers continue to escalate almost beyond pedestrian comprehension.

In 2008, according to one study, the average cost of winning a seat in the House of Representatives was \$1.1 million and the average cost of winning a seat in the U.S. Senate was \$6.5 million. *The New York Times* is reporting that presidential hopeful Mitt Romney believes it could cost him \$50 million to win the Republican nomination. In his first presidential bid, then-candidate Barack Obama spent about \$750 million. The cost this time around, some say, could run as high as \$1 billion.

The electoral system is being perpetually tied to special, meaning the most moneyed, interests. Is this democracy? It hardly seems so.

The Occupy Wall Street protests have put front and center the growing divide between two classes of Americans -- the 1 percent superrich and the other 99 percent. What needs to be more widely comprehended is that this divide has a political counterpart. What we once honored as government ?of the people, by the people and for the people? has degenerated into government ?of the 1 percent, by the 1 percent and for the 1 percent.? The rest of us -- those of us who don?t have tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands or millions to throw at politicians and political parties -- have largely lost our voices.

Big money has, indeed, run away with our country. Getting it back seems more hopeless in the wake of the 2010 Citizens United ruling in which the U.S. Supreme Court paved the way for corporations to spend unlimited amounts of money on direct campaigns to elect or defeat federal candidates, adding to their already enormous influence. In an astonishingly inept decision, the court declared that corporate political spending does not corrupt elected officials.

In every election since 2000, candidates for Congress have raised more money from big donors and political committees and less money from small donors giving \$200 or less, according to Common Cause, the nonpartisan, nonprofit advocacy organization. A 2010 Common Cause reports states that wealthy interests put in more than \$7 for every \$1 from small donors.

If the interests of ordinary people get represented at the federal level anymore, it seems to be only in passing, only when they coincide with more financially concentrated interests. Is limiting these powerful financial interests an impossible task? Revolutions do take place, sometimes unexpectedly. We need a revolution in our collective thinking. The beginnings of this seem to be happening within the Occupy Wall Street movement.

In April, congressional leaders -- Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) in the Senate and John Larson (D-Conn.), Walter Jones (R-N.C.) and Chellie Pingree (D-Maine) in the House -- reintroduced the Fair Elections Now Act. It would both reduce the influence of big donors in federal elections while enhancing the power of small donors.

Were stealth presidential candidate Roemer allowed a more public voice, he would share his six-point package to fight special interests. These include: full disclosure of every campaign contribution, no matter how small; real-time electronic reporting of campaign contributions within 48 hours, rather than quarterly; elimination of super PACs entirely; limiting political action committee donations to candidates to the same as individual contributions; prohibition of registered lobbyists participating in fundraisers; and criminal penalties for violations of campaign finance rules.

Though campaign finance reform is not on the political stage, its time might be coming. Though it?s hard to imagine that our national election process could get worse, we are quite likely to be treated to yet another decline through the next 12 months.

Maybe, just maybe, by November 2012 enough of us will have had enough to demand a radical re-ordering of an election process that has stolen our voices and government. Maybe then we will demand that our elected officials give our government back.

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